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OR, The Road-Knight's Plot.

A Romance of the Cony Flat Rivals.

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AUTHOR OF "THE CHAMPION THREE," "CALIFORNIA KIT," "THREE OF A KIND,"
"TIGER DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A VOICE OUT OF THE NIGHT.

The Overland Coach was toiling slowly and painfully up the Long Grade, five miles west of Cony Flat, in the heart of the Rockies.

Within sat a solitary "pilgrim," his arms folded, his hat drawn down upon his nose.

He was but dimly conscious when the horses were pulled up at the top of the grade, to stand panting and steaming in the chill night air of that high region.

This final quiescence, after the incessant tossing of hours, was like the coming of a ship into port; and he might have slipped off into Dreamland, but that something in the nasal drone of

"KILL ME, CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT, IF THAT WILL SATISFY YOUR HATRED; BUT DO NOT LET HIM DIE LIKE THIS!"

voices coming to him out of the darkness gradually stimulated his thin thread of lazy attention.

"Yas," said Billy Boston, the stage-driver, "I allus breathes the stock at this hyer p'nt in the road. I 'low as they've 'arnt it after the stiddy pull up that thar incline. An' I allus breathes easier myself when we git hyer, you bet!"

"Eh?" ejaculated another voice. "What fer do you breathe easier? You don't do none o' the *pullin'*. Ah! that jest reminds me! Hyer's as good a place as any, pardner, an' I'm a mite dry myself."

"You're a willin' beast, you be!"

"It's to your good health."

And there followed an interval of silence which needed no interpretation, before the stage-driver picked up again the broken thread of discourse.

"It's along o' the orneriest crowd west o' the Divide. Ef they don't pick me up before this hyer, I allus gits through without no tole took."

"Road-agents, eh?"

"You bet!"

"But they don't milk you, pardner?"

"Oh, no!"

"Waal, then, I wouldn't lose no sleep mournin' fur the crowd what took passage with me. They go in at their own resk."

"Ef that was all thar was to it, stranger, it wouldn't take no flesh off my lazy ole bones, you bet yer sweet life. But these hyar gents is so deuced keerless with their pistol-practice, that I'm lookin' to 'em fur to make me a fit subjeck fur Christian burial almost any time."

"No! Ye don't say! How's that?"

"Waal, it's all along o' the boys' kickin'. Ye needn't look fur folks to be reasonable in this wicked world. A pinch in the pocket r'iles em amazin'."

"How would it do to take up all the shootin'-irons at the start, an' give checks fur 'em, good at the finish?"

"Waal, that's an idee. But I reckon the boys hain't no leanin' fur new-fangled notions—leastways not in that direction."

"Ef they're sich screamin' kickers, why don't they fall to an' clean up this hyar gang? Can't you git on to 'em?"

"Mebby so! Mebby so!"

"Eh?"

For there was something curiously non-committal in Billy Boston's answer.

The dead silence with which he ignored the last interrogatory was still more marked.

It was this that first set the dozing passenger within to listening.

"You hain't a mite o' terbacker?" asked the stage-driver, breaking new ground.

It was evident that the other accepted this evasion, and supplied his need.

"Much obleeged," was Billy's tender of thanks.

Then his companion resumed the conversation, as if on a new topic.

"What's this I hyear about a rooster what's galavantin' around with his tail in the air, an' steel spurs strapped to his legs?"

"Thar's a pile as 'u'd fill that bill. Mebby you disremember the handle o' the pertickler one you're after."

"Captain Midnight. That's one sweet handle, that is!"

The critic spoke disparagingly, almost contemptuously.

Billy Boston took the bait, for he replied with some warmth:

"Waal, you bet it's one sweet galoot what sports it!"

"So I've hyeared," resumed the other, in a tone verging on indifference.

Maybe he overdid the matter, for Billy at once became wary.

"Waal, ye can't prove it by me. I don't know nothin' about him."

"You've seen him, I reckon?"

"Oh, yas, I've seen him, fast enough."

"What fur lookin' chap might he be, now?"

"He stands full six foot, an' maybe more, an' built in proportion. Straight as an arrer, an' spry as a wildcat. He's black all round—hair an' whiskers, an' eyes to bore a hole through ye, ef he keered to cut loose."

"He don't cut loose, then?"

"I never see him. He's got a grin on his mug what you know don't go more'n skin-deep. An' he's too blame good-natured to be ginnoine."

"They do say as he looks like an Injun, or as if he was part Greaser."

"That ain't so, pardner. He's smoke-tanned, fur a fact; but he's straight white."

"Ef you wasbettin', now, what 'u'd you bet?"

"I'd bet he was a blue-blood from south o' Mason an' Dixon's Line."

"He likes to have his own way?"

"I reckon he mostly gits it."

"Without makin' no row about it."

"Oh, no! He smiles. But his smile is—"

A gust of wind bore Billy's comparison away from the ears of the listener within the coach.

His companion laughed.

"They do say as he's got a gang at his back what might be handy at somethin' else but smilin'."

Billy, retreating again into his shell, only grunted.

"Suppose," ventured the other, as if perceiving that the stage-driver was not very likely to flow without direct pumping—"suppose this hyar Captain Midnight was to take it into his head—hean' his gang—fur to pull up the coach some dark night?"

"Ef supposin' was havin'," answered Billy Boston, rolling his quid complacently into the other cheek, "I'd suppose myself out o' this hyar business, with a bonanza pannin' out a hundred thousand a week."

"Didn't the boys never git this hyar idee into their topknots?"

"I don't run Cony Flat, stranger. I wouldn't be found dead with the place on my hands."

The other laughed, and waiving that point, began a new attack.

"Then hyar's this Belle Blackwood, what they talk about. I reckon you've seen her, pardner."

"Heaps an' slathers o' times!"

"She's well-favored, I've hyeared say."

"You bet!"

"I never see her myself."

This was plainly an invitation to describe her. "She's black, like the cap'n—hair an' eyes; but her skin is like the front of a b'iled shirt, only creamy. Boss, she's a screamer, an' no mistake, fur looks."

Billy Boston spoke with a burst of enthusiasm.

"An' actions?" supplemented the other.

And that was like a dash of cold water on Billy's glowing emotions.

"What's the matter with her actions?" he demanded.

"You tell."

"I don't do the callin' an' the showin'-up too, stranger."

"Waal, thar's queer stories afloat about her."

"What stories?"

"She belongs to the cap'n's band, fur one thing."

"Who says the cap'n has a band? He has men under him. An' maybe she lives whar he does. Waal, what do ye make o' that?"

"They say," pursued the other, insinuatingly, "as she's handsome to look at, but with a skulkin' devil in her eye when she's r'iled."

"Has any o' them roosters been r'ilin' of her?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"She'd stand a sweet show among the lot of 'em, ef she didn't have no sand."

"She ain't wantin' in sand, by all accounts. But, they do say as how she'd make a mighty good decoy fur Cap Midnight an' his crowd, ef she took the notion."

"A mighty good *what?*" cried Billy, now angrily.

"I don't say myself as it's so," protested the other. "But ef good men what got struck on Belle Blackwood, an' foller'd her up, quietly dropped out between two days—"

"Look a' hyar, stranger!" broke in the driver, "I hain't much on blackguardin' women folks, I hain't; an' we ain't gittin' on."

And without more ceremony, he let out his long whip with a crack like a pistol-report.

The horses jumped. The coach swayed violently backward, and then began to rock and jolt with the rapid motion over an uneven road.

"Captain Midnight! Belle Blackwood!" said the solitary traveler inside to himself. "We are getting into the land of romance. Some commonplace ruffian, with a painted and bedizened hussy for a stool-pigeon, I suppose. She probably seems very fine to these rough fellows."

Then he heaved a profound sigh, and repeated in a dejected voice:

"The woman! the woman!—always the woman!"

After which cynical reflection, he subsided into grim silence.

So the stage rolled on, till the final flourish and fetch-up before the door of the Crystal Palace, in Cony Flat.

As the inside passenger dismounted, he glanced at the man who had just jumped down from the nigh front wheel—him whose gossiping propensity the driver had snubbed.

There was nothing particularly striking about him. His glance may have been a trifle furtive. His manner may have lacked the frank heartiness of a man entirely without reserve. But he would have passed anywhere for a very ordinary man of the rougher class.

He was greeted as Josh Colston.

From his conversation with the driver the inside passenger had gathered that he was a stranger in Cony Flat, but this proved not to be altogether the case.

Paying no further attention to him, and indeed forgetting him entirely the moment after, he whom we have thus far designated only as the inside passenger entered the house, got his supper, and then strolled idly into the drinking saloon.

He had scarcely crossed the threshold when he was hailed with:

"Spot the sparkler, fellers!"

CHAPTER II.

A HARD BARGAIN.

PICTURE to yourself the shimmering evening star set in the waning glory of a summer sunset, mirrored on the surface of a mountain lakelet.

A few paces back of the shadow of the trees everything is wrapped in obscurity; but there is yet light enough to clearly reveal a young girl standing in the open on the margin of the lake.

Her dress is of the simplest, her head bare.

From an artist's point of view nothing could be more fortunate, for the artifices of the toilet could only divert attention from the supple grace of her tall, erect figure, and from the shapeliness of her head with its crown of raven-black hair.

Brushed smoothly away from her face, to hang in a single massive braid at her back, it leaves her clear-cut features to the severest test of unaided beauty.

It would be difficult to imagine a more perfect picture of proud strength bowed and broken by sadness, and perhaps by humiliation.

The dark, penetrating eyes are clouded; the full nether lip, the mark of an impulsive, passionate nature, lacks its wonted vivid red, and hangs tremulously apart from its fellow.

From time to time the girl sighs profoundly.

This was the tableau, soon to be quickened into dramatic life, as the silence, to which the rippling sound of a hidden cascade and the occasional dropping of a dead twig or a pine cone were but restful accompaniments, was broken by approaching footsteps.

The girl started, not with alarm, but with expectation.

"Leon!" she called, turning toward the sound.

The footsteps stopped abruptly, but there was no immediate answer to her salutation.

"Is that you, Leon?" she asked, at once setting out to meet whoever was approaching.

"It is not Leon," came a voice from the shadows, "but one who would have you turn to him with the same glad greeting."

The girl stopped abruptly, with a cry of alarm.

"Who are you?" she demanded, leaning forward and striving to penetrate the gloom with a startled glance.

"One whom you have no cause to fear. I come with love," declared the man.

The girl's right hand sought quickly the folds of her dress, where she may have carried a weapon in hiding.

"Who are you? Speak!" she commanded, now imperiously.

"Is that *my* welcome, Octavia?" asked the man, coming forward.

"Nick—Mr.—"

The girl shrunk back as she gasped out these words, and then broke off abruptly.

"Nick Rathbun, at your service."

There was just a touch of sarcasm in the man's voice, and in the formal respect with which he swept her a bow more pronounced than the occasion called for.

It was the bitterness of hurt love.

"I—I—don't know you," declared the girl, with a desperate effort to control the dismay that made her limbs tremble under her. "You must be mistaken in—in—"

"The person, Miss Marquardt?"

"You are—a—a stranger to me, sir!" she insisted, almost wildly. "You—I—"

"A stranger to your heart!" corroborated the man, coming out of the shadows so that the light disclosed one not ill-favored, barring an air of recklessness and perhaps dissipation.

As he reached her side, the girl glancing about as if for some avenue of escape, his manner abruptly changed.

"Octavia!" he cried, suddenly casting himself on his knees at her feet, "must it be this, only this, everywhere, always?"

"Oh, go away! Let me go! let me go!" pleaded the girl, breaking down, and wringing her hands in misery.

"Must I tell you it is impossible that I should follow you to your injury?" he urged.

"Do not betray us—me, I mean! I do not know where he is! I—"

"Listen! Listen! Can you not understand that your interests are mine? Must you number me among your enemies, and guard against me with even falsehood? I know that your brother is here—"

"He is innocent! Oh, believe me!"

"I am willing to swear it, whether it is so or not—for your sake!"

"But you have followed us—"

"Step by step! A bloodhound could not have tracked you more determinedly."

"Bent on betraying him!"

"Bent on never losing sight of you while there is the slightest chance of moving you to my wishes."

"But I do not love you!"

"Will you answer me one question, honestly?"</

"Is it anything in my life, so far as you know it, that prejudices me in your eyes?"

"I know little about men," she answered, with evasion in her manner and in the uncertain tones of her voice. "They seem to be very much alike. I suppose one is to be trusted about as far as another."

"I have money—"

"That is no consideration with me."

"You know that my family is of the best. I will not deny that I have made myself something of an outcast among them; but they will be only too glad to receive me back, if there be a prospect of reform, with such a wife as you."

"Let us not talk about it. I do not wish to wound you; but—but—"

"You need not repeat it!"

The man's manner hardened. He lost his air of supplication, and drew himself erect.

"Listen!" he cried. "I have appealed to you, though I knew it was of no use. The trouble is, I love you too well! I would give half my life to have you come to me willingly."

But as he saw her quail under his eye, his feelings underwent another change.

"Shall I tell you why I am here?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"You have already told me."

"Not altogether. It is true that I should have followed you anyway. But, I have not come entirely of my own motion."

"You have been sent! Some one is with you!"

"Another, less kindly disposed, is on your brother's track."

"Who?—who?"

"Detective King."

"Oh, heavens!"

The girl swayed as if she had received a staggering blow.

"Hear me out. I am here at my own request. Can you doubt that it is my wish to warn your brother, or to throw his enemy off his track?"

"You will do it?"

"I am willing to do it."

She had started forward impulsively, but she shrank back again.

He was willing to do it!

"I have but to fail to find him," he went on, with some difficulty, "and King will not think of looking further in this direction. He knows that I was a chum of Fairfax's; and he believes that I am as eager to avenge him as he himself is."

"But if you should let him know—"

"It is only fair to tell you that, guilty or innocent, the evidence is conclusive against your brother."

"He will be hanged?"

"There is no need to think of that contingency. Have I not told you that I am your friend?"

"But on what condition?"

"Give me the chance to win you!"

"Oh, I would do that; but—but you will not be satisfied. I have told you—"

"Be my wife before the law—"

"Marry you?"

"All I ask is that you go through the outward ceremony with me. You shall be as free after it as you are now—"

"But I—I—do not understand. What have you to gain by so strange—"

"I ask you to live in my home one year, that I may be free to offer you my daily devotion. If in that time I fail to win you, I swear to free you, with only the poor cost of having borne my name so long."

"Free me? How? how?"

"By suicide!"

The man spoke with cool determination, as if he had thought it all out, and was fully resolved.

The girl shrank back, with a shudder of horror.

"Oh, I have no right to lead you to such an alternative as that!"

"It is my proposition."

"But it is too horrible! I should feel that I was your murderer!"

"On the contrary, you will have extended my life at least one year. If you refuse—"

He stopped, as if loth to state the alternative.

"If I refuse?" she urged.

"I shall live only long enough to perform one office, which will not require more than a week, or ten days at the most."

"The betrayal of my brother!" she cried, impulsively. "You will first secure his conviction and execution!"

"You are determined that I shall appear to threaten you."

"But you will do it!"

He hesitated a moment and then said, slowly:

"I will put nothing in the way of its being done by another."

"And this you call love! You give me the alternative of sacrificing my brother or myself!"

"This I call love!"

Then, with a sudden outburst, where he had been so coldly calm:

"Is it so bitter a thing, then, to give me merely the chance to win you? Are you afraid that you will be more tender of heart a year hence than to-day? The situation will be the

same then as now—only life or death to me! In return, I give you your brother's life."

"You would not stand by so unheard-of an arrangement."

"But what can I do? Could I coerce your will? If you can suggest any pledge that will make you more secure, I will give it."

The girl was shaken by a terrible uncertainty.

"Oh, it is cruel to tempt me, to so torture me!" she cried. "You know that my dear brother is the only thing I love on earth; and that for him I would give my life! But this!—this!"

"If you love another—"

The man spoke with a deliberation that curled his hearer's blood. It seemed as if the possibilities of cruelty in his nature, once aroused, were infinite.

"Give me time to consider!" pleaded the girl, with a sudden outburst.

"How long?"

"A few days—a week!"

"That is too long. Give me my answer this time to-morrow."

"Oh, no! no! no! My head is in a whirl. I cannot think. Let me have five days."

"It shall be two."

"One day more. Make it three. I will answer you positively."

"Let it be three. I have but one stipulation—that you decide the matter by yourself, without consulting your brother."

"Hush!" cried the girl sharply. "They are coming! My brother is with them. He must not see you. Let me go! You shall have your answer in three days. Good-night!"

And she glided away in the now gathering darkness.

Rathbun stood perfectly still, listening to the sounds of an approaching cavalcade.

The horses were pulled up, and a confused murmur of voices came to him.

The words were indistinguishable, but the cadences of the voices were not those of ordinary quiet salutation.

The woman's high treble was more penetrating, and betrayed her emotions more clearly.

Nick Rathbun started with quick-coming suspicion and alarm, as he felt her eager passion thrill along his nerves.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Suppose she has taken it into her pretty head to betray me, and run no risk for her precious brother! What sort of a gang is this he has taken refuge with? They are unmistakably in bad odor with those who have the best chance of knowing them."

"With your leave, Miss Marquardt, I will run no unnecessary risk! Your friends may think it no more than pleasant pastime to win your favor by cutting my throat!"

"Adieu, till we meet on a more equal footing!"

And with this facetious leave-taking, he slipped away to where he had a horse tethered to the branches of a tree, and mounting, urged his course down the mountain trail.

Setting out with caution, he listened for some sound which might indicate pursuit.

He had not proceeded far, when his fears were confirmed by the sharp clang of a horse's iron-shod hoofs ringing out clear and rhythmic on the night air from further up the mountain.

They were followed by others, in numbers sufficient to compose a quite formidable party.

"They are coming, as sure as a gun!" cried Nick to himself. "It is to be a race from here to Cony Flat! It's lucky for me that I have a reliable mount. Come, old fellow! you are sure of foot; you are fleet; you have staying power! I shall need them all to-night!"

And putting spurs to his horse, he dashed away through the night, down a path that was strewn with dangers.

But as he felt the swift, assured movements of his horse, he cried within himself:

"Flutter, my pretty bird! Peck at me with your dainty bill! But you are mine! mine! mine!"

CHAPTER III.

SPOT THE SPARKLER.

"SPOT the sparkler, fellers!"

It must be admitted that this greeting was rather "fresh," the man whose appearance called it forth being a total stranger to every one in the room.

Had there been anything in his bearing or make-up to justify guying, it might have been excusable; it certainly would have been looked upon very leniently in any mining-camp west of the Watershed.

But nothing distinguished the stranger from at least one class of men who might cross that threshold at any hour in the day—most likely well on toward midnight!

True, his dress was not that of "the honest miner," and his hands gave no token of familiar acquaintance with the soil, or with a pick-helve.

White, soft, flexible, with the nails well kept, they were hands whose suggestion was still further borne out by a large diamond blazing in his shirt bosom.

Not that this last was so unusual as to call forth open comment from any one but blathering Bob Bryce. As everybody knew, it required mighty little to make Bob "shoot off his mouth."

However, the stranger took no offense, but

smiled blandly, with an inviting wave of his hand toward the bar.

"Gentlemen, oblige me! To our better acquaintance."

This mark of goodfellowship brought an expansive smile to every face; and the alacrity with which the room responded as one man, was calculated to afford satisfaction to any one with a bent toward hospitality.

"Barkeeper, if you have anything more choice in the cellar, don't save it for a better customer, who may be a long time coming."

"You pours it all out'n the same bottle, stranger—the boys knows that!" responded "Petie," as that functionary was affectionately called. "You gives it an extra shake fur to drawer champagne."

"Well, gentlemen, if you are all familiar with the trick, perhaps I can do no better than to let each draw to his own liking."

"Them familiar!" grinned Petie again.

"I should smile!" exclaimed an old fellow whose bleared eyes were unquestionable credentials as far as he personally was concerned.

"Oh, yes!—you're a smilin' crowd!"

But at this point Judge Spoopendyke took the word.

"Pardner, hyar's to your right good health! What might we call you, now, if it's a fair question?"

"Well, really," stammered the stranger, with a smiling affectation of embarrassment, "I seem to have lost my card-case—"

"Don't borrer no trouble about that, sir."

"That thar kind o' accident," broke in Bob, who stood not at all in awe of his Honor, "is epidemic in this hyar section. The jedge, now—"

"Say no more!—say no more!" interposed Judge Spoopendyke, with a large wave of the hand. "We air all gentlemen hyar—"

"An' good judges o' whisky?" interrupted irrepressible Bob Bryce.

"What is the reason," asked the stranger, "I might not pass as announced by our friend here—as Spot the Sparkler?"

"Nothing better, sir," was the judge's ready acquiescence. "Your heart's in the right spot. Long may you sparkle!"

And the boys accorded their hearty indorsement.

In that country it took very little in the way forcing to bring the conversation round to the fascinations of gambling; and though Spot the Sparkler was averse to "bucking the tiger," he admitted that he knew a small pair when he saw it.

With that opening, the judge "mounted him" at once.

"Then you will do me the honor? I don't play myself—only fur amusement."

"I am afraid I should fail to make it interesting for you. I find almost equal entertainment if permitted to look on."

"Sir, the pleasure of your company is what I count upon. We will make the stake as trifling as you please—a mere matter of counters, so to speak."

"I hope you don't attribute to me motives of—"

"Only such motives, sir, as do you most honor? I wish merely to assure you that you will meet no professionals hyar."

"Let us limit the time, then, rather than the stake, that we may not be carried beyond the interest of social pastime."

"At your good pleasure, sir."

"Will an hour suffice?"

"My only regret will be the loss of your company so soon."

"So, the very polite antagonists being opposed, the crowd gathered about to witness the contest."

A guarded conversation showed the kind of interest that was general.

"Larry, you hyear me? This hyar's a Truthful James."

"From 'Way-back!"

"The jedge, he'll git some experience fur his money—that's my idee."

"Oh, the jedge, he ain't no snoozer."

"The stranger averages well," observed a spectator, seeing that, though Inck was fluctuating, the general trend of the golden tide was toward Spot's side of the table. "That's the beauty of a player—one what averages well."

"Waal, what odds be you offerin' as the jedge don't even him up before the hour's out?"

"You're huntin' a soft thing, ain't ye? I reckon the airth wouldn't do you! I'mbettin' even, I be, as the stranger keeps what he's got, an' gits more to keep."

"Done! Anythin' to make it interestin' while a man has to stand around with his hands in his pockets."

Steadily Spot continued to win, till, as was observed by a bystander, he was "into the jedge up to the elbows."

Then came the final hand, the hour being at the point of expiration, in which it appeared that the judge was disposed to adopt a make-or-break policy, since it was his last chance to retrieve his fortunes.

With a thousand dollars already in the pot, Spot the Sparkler doubled his opponent's stake, making a clean jump of five hundred.

"Was it a bluff?"

If the judge was now "scared out," he would be "in a hole" to the tune of fifteen hundred dollars. If he went in, he would either recover his losses at a single sweep, or make it a round two thousand "up the flume."

Said the judge, in a voice the steadiness of which plainly cost him an effort:

"Pardner, I'll see you."

For answer, Spot threw his hand face-downward on the pack, drawing it toward him as if about to shuffle his cards among the others.

"Hold on!" objected the judge. "We'll have a show fur our money, if you please."

"The stakes are yours," conceded Spot.

"That ain't what we play fur," declared the judge, steadily.

Without further evasion Spot tossed his cards one by one off the top of the pack, face-upward.

He had bluffed, on a small pair.

"That'll do," said the judge, as he pocketed the money which made him good.

But the old cordiality had disappeared from voice and manner, and the boys stood dumb.

The judge felt that he had narrowly escaped a trick, forecast when it was so innocently proposed that the time, not the stake, be limited.

The boys who had bet on the stranger, more and more extravagantly as it appeared that he was too much for his opponent, felt as sore aggrieved as if he had wantonly "sold them out."

As usual, those who profited by his method, while they rejoiced at their good fortune, made him no return of gratitude.

Winners and losers, all agreed that he was a sharper, whom it would be well to look out for.

"So far," said Spot to himself, "my advent into Colorado hasn't been altogether a success; and if I come to need friends and backers before I get through with this enterprise, Cony Flat won't be the most promising place to look for them."

"I believe I should have been better off, if I hadn't fairly given that old duffer his money back. The crowd, at least, would have been with me. That's what a fellow gets by being too virtuous!"

But he laughed carelessly, and lounged about, contenting himself with the unwavering devotion of fresh Bob Bryce.

Before the Crystal Palace stood a row of seats—they could scarcely be called chairs—of the rudest construction, made of old boxes of various shapes and sizes, or even of rough boards.

Tilted back against the side of the house in one of these, Spot the Sparkler sat enjoying a meditative smoke in the moonlight, though the night air in that high region was fairly nipping.

From this reverie he was roused by some one dashing up at a break-neck pace, flinging himself from his horse, and entering the saloon in a high state of excitement.

It was evident from where Spot sat that his advent livened things up inside considerably; but the Sparkler took this as characteristic of the country, and paid no particular heed.

However, when no long space had elapsed, he was startled by a pistol-shot, the herald of a second rider at the same headlong pace, with a third hard upon his heels, and several stragglers left at various intervals in the race.

The second rider as he dashed up leaped from the saddle, and abandoning his horse in the open street, without stopping for even so much as to secure him by throwing the bridle-rein over a hitching-post, plunged headlong into the saloon.

His appearance caused a sudden hush to fall upon the noisy rout.

The third rider spurred the Sparkler to full wakefulness, proving to be a woman, and one of remarkable beauty, as was revealed by the light streaming through the door of the saloon, as she flung herself from her horse.

"The coward!" cried Spot to himself, conceiving that the man in advance had fled with an eye single to his own safety, leaving his companion to shift for herself.

But he soon had reason to believe that he had misjudged the case, and that the woman, instead of being pursued, was herself the pursuer.

He had sprung to cover her retreat, when no sooner had she crossed the threshold than the room rung with a cry of agonized expostulation.

Seeing that the exigency was within instead of without, he turned to place himself at her side whatever her need, to be jostled in his entrance by the man he had thought to oppose.

This last was of powerful build and commanding presence, and one who evidently expected to take a leading part in the events of the next few minutes.

CHAPTER IV.

MAD BLACKWOOD.

ALONG a mountain road a small troop of horsemen were dashing at a headlong gallop.

"What in Cain has got into the cap'n?" exclaimed one who rode in the rear, with a frown of disrelish for such unusual and unnecessary speed.

He addressed a single comrade, who was kept

in his company rather by the inferiority or exhaustion of his horse than by any churlish discontent on his part.

"It ain't what's in the cap'n, Jim," the other replied, cheerfully.

"Who then? This is beastly, I say!"

"You have to thank that devil-haunted pilgrim as Cap has cottoned to so of late."

"Blackwood?"

"You bet."

"What's the matter with him, anyway?"

"How should I know? It may be his conscience, an' then ag'in it may be jest unadulterated cussedness."

And Jim laughed carelessly, as one who was not particularly troubled with conscience himself.

"But what's the racket jest now?" persisted the other.

"It's along o' the news as Jack Kerby brought."

"What news?"

"About the coach."

"I didn't hyear nothin' about no coach."

"You can't expect to swing the dizzy darlin's all the while, Jim," laughed his comrade, "an' yet be on hand fur all the news as is goin'."

"I don't reckon you could make it up to me," observed Jim, not displeased by the chaff.

"Waal, you an' Blackwood oughtn't to quarrel, I reckon. It looks as if he was troubled a good deal the same way as you be. Jack was sayin' as that was a pretty leetle woman in the coach; an' Jack, ye know, has an eye fur that sort o' thing himself. He never claps eyes on to one but he gits her down fine; an' then you kin count on his not lettin' up on ye till he's give you all her points."

"Waal, he was enlargin' on this hyar, when Blackwood he comes down on him like a thousand o' brick. What was she like? Whar did she come from? Who was she? Jack had a chance to chin on that subject, fur once, to his entire satisfaction, you bet!"

"Then you'd ought to a' seen Blackwood! He spun round like a hen with its head off; an' he hain't simmered down yet."

"So we've got to be shook up in our skins because his lordship is uneasy!"

Jim looked forward to the head of the cavalcade, when two men rode side by side in advance.

One was a man of magnificent physique, full six feet in height, and riding as if born in the saddle.

He had the clear, dark, olive complexion, though not the features, of a Mexican; and his hair and eyes were jet-black, as was also the long beard that covered all his breast.

Instead of the piercing glances that one might have expected, however, the prevalent expression of his eyes impressed most people as that of laughing good nature.

This man was known by the rather odd name of Captain Midnight.

Some regarded it as only a freak, suggested by his appearance. Some held it a name of evil omen, and were prejudiced against him, without more reason, because of it.

His companion was a much smaller and younger man, of unusually fair skin, in striking contrast with his black hair and mustache.

But an expert would have seen that this contrast was due to an injudicious selection of hair-dye, his blue eyes suggesting that nature had made him a very light blonde, in respect of his hair as well of his complexion.

It was he that the lagging horseman had called Blackwood.

He now betrayed every evidence of intense excitement. There was a hunted, desperate look in his restless eyes. His quivering lips were bloodless.

"What's got into you, Blackwood?" asked Captain Midnight, glancing at his companion as if with little sympathy for his excitement.

"A thousand devils of hatred, ten thousand devils of despair!" replied the younger man, savagely.

"Oh, gammon!" laughed the captain. "You're not a dead man yet, by any means."

"I wish I were!"

"No, you don't. Come! come! brace up. No good comes of these emotional fireworks. If you would make up your mind to take the world comfortably, and laugh, as I do, you would have more flesh on your bones, and enjoy yourself a good deal better. Let the other fellow do the worrying! That's my motto."

"Give me something to do—something desperate! I want action, and—and self-forgetfulness."

"All right! Here's the coach coming right to your hand. You can—"

"Not that! Anything but that!"

"Why? What's the matter with that? Maybe it isn't desperate enough for you."

The captain evidently was not disposed to take his companion very seriously.

"I wish I could kill somebody!" cried Blackwood.

At this his companion burst into a roar of laughter.

"By Jove, Blackwood, you would make your fortune on a Bowery stage! You have missed your calling, my dear fellow. What your case

demands is dripping candle-grease and the rumbling thunder of the peanut Olympus."

The younger man only dug his spurs again into the quivering flanks of his horse.

"Don't take it out of the brute," said the captain, keeping pace with him; "and have some little consideration for the boys."

"You need not keep up with me. I'm going to Cony Flat, anyway."

"What for?"

"For diversion."

"You can't stand it, Leo. That sort of stuff was never made for gentlemen. You'll see snakes before you're much older, at this rate."

"The sooner the better!" retorted Blackwood, with gloomy recklessness.

"That's all well enough for talk. But how do you suppose the little woman is coming out in this thing? You're a tougher fellow than one would think, to look at you."

This was the first touch of seriousness in the captain's manner. Although his air was still bantering, there was an undercurrent of reprobation in what he had last said.

Blackwood frowned, rather with annoyance, as it seemed to the watchful captain, than with pain.

"I reckon the best thing I could do would be to put a bullet through my head!" he growled.

"Why don't you do it?" asked Captain Midnight.

The other made no reply.

"I'll bet you a hundred dollars to one that you haven't the pluck!"

This was making suicide too easy. Who would have the act of most tragic interest to himself provoke only a passing ripple of contemptuous laughter before forgetfulness?

Blackwood frowned savagely, and swore under his breath, without at all disturbing the equanimity of his tormentor.

A branching of the road gave him an opportunity to escape this uncomfortable familiarity.

"You are bound to go?" called Captain Midnight after him, quite cheerfully. "Well, turn in when you are sufficiently cooled off."

"A blasted good riddance!" growled Jim, now permitted to rein his horse to a more comfortable gait.

Blackwood rode off by himself, feeling very bitter against all the world.

But, escaping the companionship of the laughing captain, he found no more agreeable company in his own thoughts.

On the contrary, the further he rode, the more did the demons of his discomfited imagination haunt him, till, as the night closed in and the moonlight transformed the landscape, he found himself riding as if pursued by a legion of demons.

The silver radiance brought no serenity to his soul. Instead, in every shadow lurked a skulking fiend to gibe at him in passing, till he was driven nearly mad with horror.

This, then, was the man whose turbulent passage was sufficient to awaken only a ripple of passing interest in the dreamy repose of Spot the Sparkler.

But in the saloon his bloodless face, his glittering eyes, spread the contagion of passion on every side.

Not one that looked upon him but felt the thrill of sympathetic excitement.

"Ho, gents!" he shouted, with reckless abandon, "are there devils here, or any who would be devils before their time? If we must be devils, let us be merry devils! Come, step up! step up! This is the stuff that makes laughter where angels weep!"

"Bartender, have you any brimstone to stir into these cups of celestial nectar?"

"Come, my beauties!" he went on, addressing the women whose tawdry attire was in keeping with the mockery of their rollicking gayety. "Here's where you down conscience and—and—I beg your pardon!"

"But come on! It will put lightness into your heels, whatever else it may put into your hearts. Who is to be my partner in the maddest dance that was ever danced on the grave of every hope and every aspiration? Who would plunge a million fathoms deep into eternal fire, to win forgetfulness of such a place as Heaven?"

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! aren't we all gay? What is cheaper than happiness? What is easier than laughter? Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

"Come! laugh, and sing, and dance! Kill time and eternity!"

"What's the matter, there, you grinning death's-head? Why, you ought to be the lightest-hearted of us all! You have grown gray in the service of old John Barleycorn! Surely, those are not the bitter waters of regret your rheumy old eyes are swimming in, but the tears of a thousand thousand side-splitting laughs. And your tottering knees have in them the rollicking roll of the lusty old baron of the vat. Come! come! warm the cockles of your heart with this first draught of ambrosial distillation!"

"Brim it! brim it, bartender!"

"Now, pledge us all. Here is to courage and—and—honor! Ha! ha! ha! ha! Did we stammer a little on that? Try it again! Clean hearts and clean hands for all of us! How's that? God knows we most of us need the petition in words of burning supplication!"

"But how's your stomach?—that's the important question! Warm? comfortable? Now you smile! Look at his smile, ye gods! A glass of whisky does it; yet there are discontented people in the world!"

So this man, with the seething iron of despair in his heart, flouted them all to their faces, even as his biting scorn spared not himself.

But such a crowd is never over-nice. His sarcasm passed for wit. And in the general laughter at the grotesque delight of the old toper whom he had raised to the seventh heaven of beatitude by the unusual gratification of three brimming glasses of liquor in as rapid succession as he could swallow them, no one stopped to consider that he was eating his heart out.

"Music! music! Let it be a galop!" he shouted.

And seizing one of the women about the waist, he whirled her off around the room in dizzy gyrations.

"Faster! faster! faster! Must I oil your elbows with a golden lubricant? Faster, I say!"

Such mad abandonment occasioned no particular remark. Many were caught up in the whirl of it. All hailed with satisfaction any break in the monotony of their usual amusement.

A pandemonium of uncouth sights and sounds reigned.

Shouts of hysterical laughter, hollow mockery of mirth; badinage so coarse and fulsome that one ceased to wonder at the careless indifference with which Blackwood's gibes had been borne; yells of mere animal excitement; brutal tumult that was a caricature on dancing;—this they called enjoyment!

If the remorse-haunted man could keep the friends of memory at bay by such means, there was at least one specter that he failed to lay.

A madly-galloping horse was sharply pulled up before the door, and into the room rushed a man pale and panting with excitement, and perhaps fear.

At sight of Blackwood, he stopped short in the middle of the floor.

No less profoundly was Blackwood himself affected.

His arms fell away from the partner with whom he was dancing, and he stared at the intruder with the blankness of a man either stupid with liquor, or dazed with a stunning shock.

While thus the two men stood staring at each other, as if by magic the mad rout came to an abrupt halt.

The breathless assemblage felt that there hung a tragedy as by a single hair!

CHAPTER V.

AN UNSUCCESSFUL CHASE.

WHEN Octavia left her strange suitor to spring to the welcome of her brother, she did so with a bounding heart.

In spite of Nick Rathbun's doubts, she had told him the truth. Thus far she had known no love but this, which had been an absorbing motive in her life ever since the death of their parents had left her weak and wayward brother to her direction.

True, she was younger than he; but the mother instinct in her led her to adopt him as her especial charge.

She intercepted a party of horsemen coming up the mountain trail, indistinguishable in the gloom.

As before she called:

"Leon!"

Her voice, vibrant with affectionate eagerness, prompted the words of Captain Midnight in reply.

"It's a pity to disappoint you, my queen; but that graceless fellow—"

"That is you, Captain Midnight?"

"Your devoted slave!"

"And my brother?—Leon?"

"He does not deserve such devotion. I would advise you to discipline him with a little—"

"He is not with you?"

"He has had the bad taste to go off to Cony Flat, for what he calls—"

"To Cony Flat!"

It was evident that the girl was more interested in her brother than in Captain Midnight's opinions. Nevertheless the captain took this unpremeditated snubbing in good part.

"Why such dismay, fair lady? There is nothing in Cony Flat to—"

"Oh, he must not go there—not now!"

"And should not have gone, had I known you so seriously objected to it. But he must be pretty nearly arrived by this time. He left us at the Lone Pine Fork."

"Then I must go for him at once. Will you kindly accompany me—you and a few of the men? It may be necessary to— Oh, I don't know what!"

"Whatever it is, you know that you can count on us to the death."

"You are very kind. I do not wish for violence, if it can be avoided."

In great agitation she ran up the trail.

"Take my horse," petitioned the captain, spurring to her side, and leaping to the ground.

"If a side-saddle is not indispensable to you—"

"There is a man— If you could overtake him— But no!"

And interrupting herself, she resumed her former purpose.

She was nimble afoot, and the captain had to mount again to keep pace with her.

Soon reaching a cluster of low rambling houses, which presented the appearance of a cross between a hunters' camp and a grazier's ranch, she was about to make her way at once to a structure which proved to be a stable, when the captain interposed.

"Go to the house, and get something on your head, and a shawl to wrap about you. The night is going to be sharp before our return. I will fetch the mare to the door before you are through with your preparations."

"Thank you!" was her only reply, as she took him at his word.

"What's the row, Cap?" asked one of his followers, whom he summoned to his assistance.

"I can tell you better to-morrow, probably," answered the captain, in his careless way. "Throw that surcingle over to this side, will you?"

"Steady, old girl!" to the restive mare.

"She don't like nobody but Miss Belle to teach her," observed the man, calling Octavia by the name by which she was known to him and his fellows. "Drat ye! She'd rather nip a piece out o' me than if I was oats."

"I wouldn't let any other woman ride her."

"Miss Belle, she got a nerve; but the vixen she'll git away with her some day—you heyear me!"

"I reckon not. A horse has more sense than most men. She knows who's han'ling her."

The mare was certainly high spirited, and her lithe limbs promised fleetness.

She was scarcely in readiness before Belle—we may as well give her the name by which she will be most generally known—made her appearance.

"Beauty! little Beauty!" she said, cooingly, passing her hand down the mare's nose.

It was only a touch, but a touch of affection; and the animal responded with an equally friendly nibble at the girl's hand.

Then into the saddle, and away!

Down the mountain-side they went, now galloping free, now trotting more cautiously, now picking their way with extreme caution, in a manner which showed that both horse and rider were familiar with the dangers of the path.

So did they take advantage of every chance to make time, that the men following were soon strung out in a straggling line.

Even Captain Midnight failed to keep up with the little mare and her urgent rider.

So these were they whom Nick Rathbun heard come thundering on his track, as he fled the following, not dreaming what lay before.

Some of his pursuers he knew he was leaving behind; but one gained upon him so as to enter the camp almost at his heels.

Who was it? The darkness prevented discovery.

"Nick! Nick!"

"Ha! it is she!"

For a moment he trembled on the verge of reining in his horse.

"Her first petition! And when was Nick— young Nick, or Old Nick!—ever wooed so tenderly before. But the dear creatures are deceitful, the best of them; and this sudden familiarity is suspicious. Once in my power, I'll risk her sentiment toward me; but I'll think twice before putting myself into her power—especially backed by her peculiar friends!"

And instead of replying, he dug his spurs the more pitilessly into his horse's quivering flanks.

"By what convincing oath can I swear that I did not hear her?" he asked himself.

But to what soon followed he could not plead deafness.

A pistol-shot rung out sharp and clear on the night air, and he heard the zip and ping of the bullet uncomfortably near.

"Hang me if she isn't becoming desperate!" cried the fleeing lover. "What can have happened to make her throw up all chance of amicable adjustment? I could teach you a trick worth two of that, my beauty! If she is determined to slaughter me, why not lure me into an ambush of her friends, and do the thing quietly?"

So he sped to the door of the Crystal Palace, leaped from his horse, and rushed into the house, to confront Leon Marquardt, or Blackwood, as he was there known, in the height of his mad revel.

For a moment the two men stared at each other in about equal dismay.

It was Blackwood who first "lost his grip" in this battle of the eye.

With the quickness of a panther he whipped out his revolver, and leveled it at Rathbun, hissing venomously:

"You devil! You have followed me! But I'll fix you before I go!"

Then it was, while everybody in the room hung breathless on the bloody issue, that a second figure flashed through the door, and the room, as we have said, rung with a cry of expostulation.

"Leon! Leon! oh, my brother!"

CHAPTER VI.

AN INTERCEPTED TRAGEDY.

ALL present knew Belle Blackwood—not personally, for she had no friends, but by sight and by reputation.

"Leon, you shall not!" she cried, throwing herself before Rathbun, and spreading her arms, to oppose her own breast to the menacing revolver.

"Stand aside!" ordered Blackwood, hoarsely.

"No, no, I will not! Leon, you are beside yourself! Listen to me!"

"It is either he or I! Do you suppose that I will tamely be led back to—"

"Leon! Leon!"

"Will you have me risk hitting you? Stand aside, I say!"

But here, brushing by Spot the Sparkler, Captain Midnight seized Nick Rathbun by the arm, and swung him round, hissing into his ear:

"Come! Are you to stand here like a post? Get out of this!"

And with the impetus of his swing he sent him on his way toward the door.

Nick had not had time to draw his weapon, even if he would have done so after he found himself protected by the woman he loved.

But the fact that the captain retained hold on his arm as he hustled him toward the door was not particularly reassuring.

"He is the chief of the gang," reflected Nick.

"They may prefer to give me my quietus less publicly. Well, I prefer to have it out with them here!"

And he made a desperate effort to free himself.

He found that he was in the hands of no boy. The instant he began to squirm, he was caught up off of his feet, and quietly tucked under the captain's arm.

He was deprived of his weapons with equal facility, and carried out through the door, willy-nilly.

"Release me, you scoundrel!" he gasped, panting with his futile struggle. "And is this such a villainous community that an outrage like this can be perpetrated without a single voice raised in protest?"

"People practice minding their own business here," answered the captain, coolly. "If you will simmer down, you shall be made quite comfortable till we determine upon your final disposal."

"My final disposal! By the bullet or the knife, I suppose!"

"We may conclude to let you off with a sound thrashing," said Captain Midnight, pleasantly.

By this time they were out of doors, and the captain's men had galloped up.

He turned his prisoner over to them, as a matter of course, saying:

"Hobble this fellow. But you needn't make off with him unless forced to. In any event, see that you do not let him out of your hands."

"It'll take more'n Cony Flat to gobble him!" declared the captain's lieutenant. "My Christian friend, I reckon you'd druther be easy than uncomfortable."

It was plain that these cheerful scoundrels did not stand on any particular ceremony.

Meanwhile, within, Belle Blackwood had advanced and thrown her arms about her brother.

A startling change had come over him. His truculent demonstration against Nick Rathbun had given place to the utter prostration of panic.

Clinging to his sister, he cowered into her arms, a quivering, quaking mass of abject terror.

Those who stared at him in amazement at his condition, felt the chill of cowardice thrill through their veins for very sympathy.

He tried to speak, but his chattering teeth left his words scarcely intelligible, while his staring eyes rolled about as if he were hunted on every side.

"Oh, let me get out of here! Let us away! What can we do? Where can we go? Ah! there is the captain! He will stand by us! He is our only friend! Cap! Cap!"

Captain Midnight was returning from his expulsion of Nick Rathbun.

The wretched Blackwood greeted him with a fawning smile, and sought to escape his sister's arms to go to him in spaniel-like supplication.

At that the girl was seized with a sort of terror mingled with rage.

"Oh, no! no! no!" she cried. "Leon, dear Leon, you are safe! I will protect you! Only go with me! He is the worst of all your enemies! Trust to me! Leon! Leon!"

But her strength was nothing against his, now augmented as in the case of mania.

Not heeding that she clung to him, he dragged her away to where he could seize the captain's hand.

"Stand by me, Cap!" he pleaded. "Don't let that devil betray me! You have him safe!"

And putting his lips to the captain's ear, he whispered hoarsely:

"Give me one blow at him in the dark!"

The captain laughed encouragingly, as he clasped Leon's trembling hand and clapped him on the back.

"What's the matter with you, old man?"

Brace up! brace up! If you have any enemies here or anywhere else, let them come out to the ranch and state their case."

The implication of his voice and the look which he cast about the room was, that "the ranch" would probably prove a not very favorable place for the plaintiff.

Then he smiled indulgently at Belle, who stood wringing her hands in helpless despair at his ascendancy over her brother.

"You are bound to consider me a rival," he said, with his lips at her ear, so that nobody else heard what he said. "Come! come! be reasonable. Your brother is safe with me, whoever his enemies, and whatever their grievance; and you are free to leave whenever he feels that he can do so with advantage."

"We shall never escape you!" almost sobbed the girl, shaking her head despondently.

Submissively she followed her brother and his chosen protector out of the room, no one offering any remonstrance or venturing any question.

They mounted and rode away, only Captain Midnight remaining behind.

However, he first released Nick Rathbun, having ascertained that there was no reason for his detention.

"You will overlook my treatment of you, I hope," he apologized, with the air of one who could well have afforded to dispense with that ceremony if he had chosen. "As the lady has nothing against you, of course I have not."

"I ought to be a thousand times obliged to you!" sneered Nick. "You performed the painful duty with all consideration."

"Then suppose we say nothing further about it," suggested Captain Midnight.

He smiled benignly; yet Nick felt that somewhere in the disguised cadences of his voice there lurked a covert menace.

Captain Midnight went back into the saloon, where the revel was gradually resuming its wonted course, which, not long obstructed even by a murder, had been thrown only into a momentary eddy by the events described.

Nick Rathbun went off by himself, a return to the scene of his ignominious capture not offering a pleasant prospect.

Spot the Sparkler had kept so retired that Belle Blackwood had not noticed him; nor had her brother or Nick Rathbun.

The night air having become uncomfortably chilly, he did not return to his seat outside, but remained in the saloon, where he was soon to meet with an adventure destined to lead to significant results.

It will be remembered that his encounter with Judge Spoopendyke had left the public sentiment of the place against him.

It proved, however, that there was one who did not share the suspicion and dislike thus aroused—an uncouth giant, rank with the odor of tobacco and grimy with general uncleanness, his unkempt hair littered with bits of straw and his even worse neglected beard foul with tobacco juice.

"Whoop!" yelled this individual, suddenly. "Whar's all the fun gone? I hain't had a mite o' fun sence sundown. My j'ints is beginnin' to feel stretchy. Ef you please, I'll take a hand."

And leaping into the air, he cracked his heels together, and began to fling himself about in a straggling breakdown, while he howled in accents but remotely suggestive of a tune:

"Oh, I'm a happy mortal, ef ever that was one! I'm in a 'tarnal racket from rise to set o' sun! On shootin' lead I fatten; on shovin' steel I thrive! I dance an' sing, An' hev' my fling, As sure as you're alive!"

"Whoop! whoop! whoop! whoop! Whoop! whoop! whoop! whoop!"

"Give me room, gents! When I cut myself loose, stand up on the benches! Wharever I rove I leave the gore knee-deep!"

"Oh, I'm a poopy mortal, as poopy as kin be! The ladies, how they ogle—oh, how they coddle me! But, howsoe'er they simper, or howsoe'er they sigh, I dance an' sing, An' hev' my fling, Oh, root ma-hog-on-i!"

"Whoop! whoop! R-r-r-r-r-r-ow!"

"Boss!" he shouted, suddenly breaking off as his calf-like antics brought him around to Spot the Sparkler, "you're my meat!"

Then striking a grotesque attitude, he introduced himself:

"My name is Bully Bill! I chaw my mutton fine!"

CHAPTER VII.

A PAIR OF SIXES.

THE stranger was apparently familiar with this sort of "monkey-business;" for he replied in the same spirit:

"Let us know when you think you're about ready to begin to chaw."

The "blow-hard" immediately gave his words a different significance, by extending his grimy paw, with:

"Now is the accepted time, boss—now is the

day o' salvation! Not as I'm a-salivatin' anybody, ye understand. I'm a-takin' plug ef I kin git it, but fine-cut an' thank ye, ef ye hain't got nothin' better!"

And with a grin he ran his tongue around his teeth, to free them from any remains of his last "chaw," in preparation for a fresh supply.

"I regret to say that I have neither to offer you," said Spot. "But the barkeeper here is furnishing my friends with whatever they are pleased to call for."

"Waal, I'm modest, I be, by natur'. I'll take one o' them twisted fellers, barkeeper. Petie, he's got the size o' my mouth down fine. Hyar's consolation!"

"How can I serve you further?"

"By givin' me the same show you gi'n' the jedge, pardner."

"But I don't pretend to be a player."

"No more do I. Why, pardner, ef you'll believe me, I never played fur nothin' but peanuts tell I come to this hyar abode of iniquity!"

With a regretful shake of the head, as he drew a plethoric bag of buckskin from his pocket and struck it down on the table, he sighed:

"Ah! them was my days o' hayseed innocence! When will they come ag'in? Them was the days when they called me Willy, an' thrid their fingers through my flaxen hair! Now it's Bully Bill hyer, an' Bloody Bill thar; an' nobody loves me!"

A moment Spot stood in apparent irresolution, scanning Bully Bill. Then, as if with a sudden purpose, he resumed the seat he had occupied opposite Judge Spoopendyke.

"Pardner!" whispered Bob Bryce into a friend's ear, "thar's music in the air!"

"Bill, he's a bad 'un," was the response.

"He's got his match. You heyear me?"

"I hope he has. But the stranger will hev to be lightnin' on the shoot."

"He'll git thar! Don't you worry!"

A rather odd circumstance proved that there were others in the room who viewed Bully Bill with misgivings.

Without marked abruptness, the spectators drew out of line directly behind the stranger, and by a sort of sympathy also from behind Bully Bill, grouping themselves at either end of the table.

If Spot noticed this, he gave no outward token of the fact. His face was as calmly impassive as when playing with the judge.

He uttered not a word irrelevant to the game, unless in reply to some direct address; though then he answered without annoyance.

Bully Bill, on the other hand, was a perfect magpie as to talk, while everything he did was accompanied by an antic, intended, many suspected, to divert the attention of his adversary from certain really significant movements in which he indulged as opportunity offered.

Spot did not seem at all disturbed by this "monkeying," nor did it appear to suggest to him the need of any especial watchfulness.

To be sure, in spite of his outward carelessness, he had from the first displayed the alertness of an experienced player.

He never thought of sorting his cards, as a bungler is apt to do. A single glance, and they went face-downward on the table, not to be further disturbed till it was necessary to display them.

This left him free to study his adversary, though he seemed scarcely to take the trouble to do so.

It may have been an accident that the stakes were potted at Bully Bill's left, so that when he reached for his winnings he used that hand, his adversary in the inverse case using his right hand.

However, there was a tradition that this simple fact had once stood Bully Bill in good stead, having enabled him to settle a dispute by shooting his antagonist dead.

Of even this Spot the Sparkler apparently took no note.

As before, his winning was exasperatingly steady.

"Pardner, you've got this game down fine," growled Bully Bill, irritated by a loss where he had confidently expected a gain.

"It seems to me very simple," answered Spot, coolly.

"You ain't givin' your method away, all the same."

"I make no secret of it."

"Fur instance," suggested Bill.

"Why, by the law of chances, you are bound to lose about half the time. Then all you have to do, is to see that you lose the small pots, and win the bigger ones."

"Oh, yas!" answered Bill, sarcastically, while the crowd roared with laughter at his enlightenment.

Presently the on-lookers observed that the stakes were increasing in amount, while Bully Bill became more rollicking as he grew bolder in venture.

As with the judge, Spot made a sudden raise when the stakes were already large.

"Oh, no, pardner!" laughed Bully Bill. "You can't play that game twice in the same evenin'. I don't call you, boss; but I go my pile. See me, ef you've got the sand!"

"I'll have a show, if you please," answered Spot, covering the bully's stake.

"Ha!" gasped Bill, glaring at his adversary with a wolfish glitter in his eyes.

But almost instantly he recovered himself, and threw down his hand demanding:

"How's that?"

He discovered a full.

Without observation, Spot displayed a pair of sixes, leaving the other three cards face-downward.

"What's that?" demanded Bully Bill, staring at the scant showing.

"A pair of sixes," answered Spot, coolly.

"But you never see me on them?"

"What's the reason I didn't?"

"Waal, you've got a gall—that's all I say!" ejaculated the bully, after a short, incredulous pause.

And he reached out to appropriate the pot.

"Hold on!" objected Spot.

"Eh! what's the row?"

"Whose pot is that?"

"Mine, I reckon."

"Not much!"

"What's the reason it ain't?"

"Because I hold a better hand."

Then Bully Bill, with an ebbing of the color in his face, looked at the cards not yet shown.

"What you got in thar?" he demanded.

"Three of a kind to clap on top o' that dirty pair?"

"No," said Spot, unmoved.

"Then, what you talkin' about?"

"Ain't that good?"

"Your pair take my full?"

"But I have another pair—of sixes."

At that Bully Bill turned suddenly livid.

"Another pair o' sixes!" he repeated.

"Don't four of a kind take a full?" asked Spot, quietly.

"Show 'em up!—show 'em up!" demanded Bully Bill, with a vehemence that puzzled those of the listeners who were sensitive to fine shades in the voice.

Spot reached out his left hand, and turned over the other cards.

Their values were entirely dissimilar. They added nothing to the pair previously shown.

"Whar's yer other pair o' sixes what ye're talkin' about?" cried Bully Bill, staring at them.

"Under the table," replied Spot, as soft as silk.

Then their glances met.

There was only quiet waiting in Spot the Sparkler's eyes.

Bully Bill's were fixed into a questioning stare.

The crowd noticed that Spot's hands were out of sight, apparently resting at ease on his thighs.

In that country it did not require even an ominous *click-click!* to suggest the suits of that other "pair of sixes."

But what was this? A cool robbery in the very teeth of a score of men, no one of whom would stand such a thing in the case of even his worst enemy?

"Hold on, stranger!" cried Judge Spoopendyke. "Almost anythin' will go down in this hyar crowd. But fur frozen bulldozin' you take—"

"I have no doubt, gentlemen," answered Spot, not taking his eyes from those of Bully Bill, "that you will be satisfied if my opponent is willing to concede that my hand is good."

Everybody stared with mouth agape at Bully Bill.

He seemed to rouse himself, as if from fascination.

A sickly smile, like the grimace of a hyena, distorted his face, as he said:

"Pard, I reckon that's good. You needn't bother to show up that other pair o' sixes."

He rose from the table, leaving the stakes in their place.

Without a word further, without looking at anybody, he stalked out of the house.

Spot the Sparkler quietly appropriated the pot, without explanation to any one.

"Waal," said Bob Bryce to his friend, "what do you make o' that thar?"

"I don't make nothin' of it," was the non-committal reply.

"Waal, I do!"

"What do you make of it?"

"Bloody Bill had one o' them sixes up his sleeve!"

"He hed, eh?"

"You bet he hed!"

However this might be, nobody seemed disposed to canvass the matter but fresh Bob Bryce.

But Spot the Sparkler was now regarded with glances which showed that this little episode had given him an enviable place in the estimation of every one present, as far as appreciation of shrewdness and courage went.

The boys admired him, however firmly they might be resolved not to "buy any experience" of him.

Chief among these was Captain Midnight, who thus far had made no advances to Spot, though he had from the first regarded him with undisguised interest.

He yet maintained his reserve, leaving it to fresh Bob Bryce to turn the conversation to skill at marksmanship.

"Well," said Spot, with an amused smile at Bob's fresh petition that he give the company a specimen of his skill, "how shall it be?"

"Any way to suit yerself!" answered Bob, rubbing his hands in complacent self-gratulation at the neat way in which he had led up to this result.

Spot turned to the barkeeper.

"A half-dozen cigars, if you please. Thanks! Now, gentlemen, will an equal number of you oblige me?"

And he offered the cigars to whomever happened to stand nearest to him.

They were accepted without urging.

"If you will now oblige me further by standing here in a row—facing to the left, if you please. So! Now I will stand at the other end of the room, and knock the fire off of your cigars in rotation."

Bob lost his breath.

"Eh! What! An' we stand hyar—"

"Certainly."

"Not of the court knows herself! An' we're a fool ef she don't!"

"What's the matter?"

"Excuse me ef you please! Not me, stranger! I've got an ole mother, I have, some'ers, an' she sets a heap by me—she does so! It may be all right fur to talk o' meetin' her up in heaven, an' all that; but blow me ef I wouldn't druther stan' my chance o' seein' her ag'in down hyar!"

"But I shan't lessen your chance."

"Not ef I kin help it, boss!"

"I thought you wanted to see me shoot."

"That was before I knewed you was a fool-killer! But you take the cigar, an' let me pepper at you. Ef you come through all bunk, mebby I'll stand my turn—ef I don't think better of it."

"Excuse me! I haven't the same confidence in your skill that you professed to have in mine."

The boys fell to laughing at the dilemma into which Bob had got himself, but he vindicated his position by offering his cigar to each of them in turn.

However, one and all declined, each cudgeling his brain for some excuse that would win a laugh; and it was a merry enough crowd while it was being made clear that no one was disposed to stand such a test.

"Well, then," proposed Spot, "suppose we fasten them up against the wall, like this. Here is a star with five points, with the center where they all meet for the sixth shot. Now, if you will give me a little range, so that the smoke will not obstruct my view, we'll see what can be done."

Having placed the cigars, he went to the other end of the room, and walking rapidly toward the left, fired six shots, one at each step.

"By glory!" shouted Bob, springing to examine the mark. "Fetched her plum center every time!"

And it was true that Spot had clipped the outer ends of the cigars in rotation, and the points where they met all at once with a single bullet.

"Stranger," said Captain Midnight, "you're mighty handy with that thing, to be sure."

Spot turned to look at the speaker, his attention particularly attracted by something in his voice.

He saw a man of full six feet in height, with a handsome, smiling face, and a magnetic eye.

He was of unusually dark complexion; his hair was black, and very soft and fine.

Where did the mark of power lie? He wore the air of negligent ease; yet one felt that he could sway most men with no apparent effort.

He engaged Spot in conversation, when the latter soon made a discovery which set him to wondering speculation.

The others fell away, busying themselves with one another, with ill-concealed frowns and sulken coldness.

Whoever this man might be, it was plain that he was not popular with his neighbors.

When he had taken his departure, expressing a wish that his good fortune might lead to a closer acquaintance with Spot, the latter sought information of Bob Bryce.

He found that Bob could put a break on his tongue when it served his purpose; and he now betrayed the same non-committal spirit that had marked Billy Boston.

It required a regular cross-examination to draw out of him that Captain Midnight and his gang *might* be hide-hunters, and they might be almost anything else.

Bob even went so far as to close the matter somewhat abruptly.

"Howsomever, that ain't nuther hyar nor thar. Cap'n Midnight an' his crowd ain't none o' my funeral, nohow! As fur Belle Blackwood, ef she asks you in, don't you go!"

"Asks me in?"

"Oh, they don't all put it in words. You'd orter know that, at your time o' life."

"But I don't understand."

"Think it over. I give you so much as a friend. But I'm done. Don't pull me into the mud, stranger, fur tryin' to help you out."

Spot watched the faces of the others while

Bob was speaking. One and all frowned disapproval.

"I may see more of this Captain Midnight," reflected Spot.

He was destined to—and of Bully Bill as well.

He had certainly made some enemies, if no friends, in his short stay at Cony Flat.

The following morning he rode out of the camp on a rented horse, to make a short trip up the country, as he said.

Three days later a posse of determined-looking men took the same trail.

"He's a lightnin' poker-player, an' a lightnin' shootist," said Bob Bryce; "but who in Cain'd 'a' thunk as he was a lightnin' hoss-thief in the bargain!"

CHAPTER VIII.

LOST!

THERE was a little incident worth mentioning connected with the securing of the horse on which Spot the Sparkler rode out of Cony Flat.

The one he selected the moment his eyes rested upon him was a magnificent black gelding, full of fire, and with fleetness stamped upon every swelling muscle of his lithe body.

But the owner objected:

"Boss, I ain't spilin' fur to let that thar animal. Take yer pick out o' the rest. They're all A—one."

"But this one suits me," said Spot. "I like to feel that I have some life under me."

"I hain't lettin' everybody as comes along straddle him," persisted the owner, hesitatingly.

"I will give you a dollar extra."

"Waal, look sharp after him. I wouldn't—"

"Have no anxiety. I have grown up among horses."

There the matter seemed settled.

But when Spot had turned away, a lounging who had eyed him with no particular liking, put in:

"Say, Thad!—who's this hyar, anyhow?"

"How should I know?"

"That was jest what I was thinkin'."

"Eh?"

"Ob, nothin'."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Nothin'—nothin'. Every man knows his own business best."

"Who is it, Josh?"

"How should I know?"

"You don't know nothin' about him?"

"Nary."

"Then what was you gittin' through you?"

"Nothin'. Only if that thar was my hoss, I'd try him on one o' the others first."

"Why?"

Josh only look steadily at the questioner, and then with a shrug muttered:

"H'm!"

With which mysterious disposal of the subject he walked away with his hands in his pockets.

On the following morning when Spot came to claim the horse, he heard an angry voice raised in profane objurgation.

He saw a boy fleeing before the owner of the horse, who threw a club after the retreating figure as he abandoned the chase.

"I'm mighty sorry, boss," said the horse-owner. "But that young cub has lamed this hyar hoss. You'll have to take one o' the others after all. I wouldn't let this 'un go out in this shape, nohow."

And he led the horse about, to show that he was quite lame.

Spot took one of the others, and rode out of the camp, the owner following him with a discontented eye.

When he was gone Thad lifted the foot of the gelding, and pried a small pebble from under the shoe, the animal thus relieved walking with his usual ease.

The horse that fell to Spot's lot was one of the very pronounced marking often noticed as a result of crossing the broncho with Eastern stock.

Great livid patches diversified a general ground of white, making the animal so peculiar that once seen, he would be easily recognized again.

Though the owner of the horses did not suspect it, the man who had been instrumental in effecting this change was in the interests of Captain Midnight.

Spot the Sparkler would have been somewhat surprised to know that he owed this favor to no less a person than Josh Colston. But in blissful ignorance of any intrigue he kept his way.

When he was clear of the camp a marked change came over him. His very posture in the saddle changed from erect buoyancy to the sagging relaxation of despondency.

"How many wrecked lives there are!" he said to himself. "I wonder if that fellow is more unhappy than I. He at least has one who cares enough for him to stand by him through thick and thin; while I—I have no one in all the world!"

He sighed sadly, and his eye grew humid with some unspoken thought.

"Well, well, perhaps it is better not to drag any one down in one's fall. Better be the victim than the destroyer."

Then, his face hardening with resolve:

"But I will not be that tamely! If— But what's the use in talking?"

He drew a photograph from his pocket, and gazed upon it tenderly.

It was of a very beautiful young girl, with fair and gentle eyes.

"She almost speaks!" he cried to himself, with a sudden ebullition of emotion.

And he kissed the picture again and again.

"How you'd you question me?" he asked, apostrophizing the absent subject of the photograph.

At that his face took on a hurt, resentful look; and he put the effigy back into his pocket.

So absorbed was he in his thoughts that he paid very little attention to his course, with the result that, after the lapse of some hours, he began to look about in a mystified way.

"This is a blind sort of a path," he said to himself. "It has dwindled away into the little end of nothing; and I ought to have come out somewhere by this time."

He looked up at the sun, and then at his watch.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "I must have got off of the trail."

This proved to be the truth; and the declining sun found him ready to admit that he was lost.

The moment that this dawned upon him, the wilderness took on a strange appearance.

Whichever way he looked a vista seemed to lure him; but the interminable succession of hills and valleys seemed to be all alike.

"There's nothing for it," he concluded, at last, "but to try to follow my own trail back. But to do that I shall have to have daylight. Therefore I have the pleasant prospect of a night without food or shelter. How stupid not to have brought so much as a biscuit along against a possible contingency. I haven't even a blanket! Any one would know that I was a tenderfoot!"

He tried to laugh the matter off; but as the air got chilly with the coming darkness, his discomfort promised to try all of his philosophy.

"I have water—that's some comfort!—and the horse can forage for himself. Who was it that took to eating grass? He wouldn't fare very sumptuously here! At any rate, there is no need of my having all the teeth rattled out of my head shivering. I'll build a rousing fire. It may attract somebody. I will be grateful for anything in human shape."

He built his fire, and it brought him company that he had not counted upon.

It is all very well to *read* about coyotes. Nobody is afraid of them *on paper*. But the first night that any man passes alone with these serenaders, if it doesn't try his nerves, he must be a tougher tenderfoot than the common run.

Spot the Sparkler had never been so grateful for the first gray streaks of dawn.

All the next day was spent in the vain effort to follow back his own trail; but somewhere he must have got off of it; for, when the sun hung low in the western sky, he was forced to declare that he had penetrated a part of the wilderness wholly unfamiliar.

A second night passed very like the first, except that he was so exhausted he slept fitfully, only rousing when some thief bolder than his fellows tried to snatch his boots from under his head.

The second day of his fast he had spent mostly on foot, with the bridle-rein over his arm. The third found him back in the saddle, the hopeless task of following the trail abandoned, and his only hope that chance might lead him to some human habitation.

He was now so weak with hunger and anxiety and the strain of continued exertion, that he could scarcely retain his position in the saddle.

It was nearly noon when his horse's tread attracted the attention of a man who was wandering alone in the mountain wilderness.

"I'll see who it is before I give myself away," observed a gruff voice, cautiously. "Somebody as has got wind o' this, I'll bet. Maybe I'll plant him ef he comes nosin' too sharp!"

And skulking in the covert, no less a person than Bully Bill peered forth with menacing eyes.

"By mighty!" he growled, on catching sight of the rider. "Ef it ain't that snoozer as I've been layin' fur these three days! I 'lowed as he'd give me the slip fur good an' all. Waal, I'll riddle him with all the pleasure in life!"

And drawing his revolver, he glared with the lust of blood in his eyes at the unsuspecting Spot.

"Curse him! ain't he comin' this way?" he muttered, as the trail Spot was just then leaving his horse to follow made some unexpected deviation. "I'd creep up on him, but I ain't minded to give him a sight o' me, ag'in' the chance o' missin' him. He knows how to shoot, he does; an' I ain't achin' fur the trip over the Divide jest now. Ah! hyar he comes! Now, Mister Man!"

On came Spot the Sparkler, almost reeling in the saddle, and far too much used up to make much of a fight, even if he had been given a fair show.

"I'll let him pass me," muttered Bully Bill. "He'll never see who fired at him if I miss."

Resting his heavy revolver on a twig to secure a steady aim for the rather long range, he fired at last.

Then, with a cry of exultation, he leaped to his feet.

"Fetched him plumb-center!"

For, his horse giving a leap of fright at the unexpected explosion, Spot the Sparkler tumbled headlong from the saddle.

Still more frightened at the loss of his rider, the animal bounded away in full career.

Bully Bill stood staring after him in perplexity.

"That was mighty clean work," he said to himself, "ef I really plugged him whar he lived. But he may be playin' possum, fur to come back at me an' do me fur all I'm worth, when I go in on him. I reckon I'll go slow, an' feel my way. Ef he's dead, I don't lose nothin'; an' ef he's alive yit, I may save a hole to patch in my skin."

Between him and where Spot had fallen was a considerable growth of underbrush, so that his victim could not be seen.

He therefore began to make his way cautiously toward the spot, his weapon held in readiness for instant use if he caught sight of his enemy moving.

His face distorted with murderous hatred, and his bloodshot eyes peering warily about, as he crept forward, no more perfect picture of villainy could well be conceived than that presented by Bully Bill.

But he had proceeded only a little way when he was brought to an abrupt halt by the sudden arrest of the flying horse.

Bully Bill stopped with a volley of savage execrations.

"Somebody else? I never have no luck. Waal, I reckon I'll have to let it go fur what it's worth. Ef I hain't fetched him this time, I'll lay fur him ag'in. Anyway, I ain't leavin' no trail by his body fur to be follered. The scarcer I make myself, the better appetite I'll have this time next year, I reckon."

And skulking so as not to be discovered, he hastened from the vicinity.

There was no sound of the approach of the person who had stopped the flying horse; but neither did the animal proceed any further.

This was proof that he had been secured, but that the person was not so rash as to plunge headlong into danger.

Who could it be? And what was the fate of Spot the Sparkler?

CHAPTER IX.

GOING TO HER FATE.

As soon as Belle Blackwood had her brother to herself, free from the influence of Captain Midnight, he at once yielded to the solicitations of her love, with the pliability of an essentially weak nature.

Side by side they rode, in the wake of the men whom Captain Midnight had dismissed as soon as he had only himself to look after.

"Dear Leon!" sobbed the girl, "don't you see that you—"

But here she broke off, and altered the sentence so as to avoid the personal reproach, concluding;

"That this life is breaking my heart?"

"What is there in it to break your heart?" asked Mad Blackwood, as he had been dubbed.

He spoke with impatience. It was plain that he did not return or appreciate the tender love she bore him.

"Can you ask?" she urged, humbly enough, "knowing the constant anxiety I suffer on your account?"

"But why don't you leave me to look out for myself? I am all right."

"Oh, Leon!"

"Will fretting do any good? But I reckon I won't keep you in suspense long. When my neck is stretched for good and all, you will have a rest."

He shivered at the prospect, though he affected to sneer at it.

The girl did not show how his want of feeling hurt her; but she diverted him from his present mood by giving the conversation a slight turn.

"It is not that which we have most reason to fear," she said.

"Not that?" he cried. "Maybe you fancy that that accursed Rathbun is out here on a pleasure excursion."

"He will not harm you, Leon."

"He will hang me, if he can!"

"You are mistaken. I have every assurance—"

But she broke off, feeling that she was on dangerous ground, if she did not wish to betray the understanding between her and Nick Rathbun.

"Of what?" asked her brother, turning to look at her wonderingly.

"That his presence here is not a menace to you."

"How do you know? Have you seen him before?"

There was no escaping it. She answered:

"Yes."

"You did not tell me!" with quick suspicion.

"I have not had the chance."

"When did you see him?"

"Just before the captain's return—while I was waiting for you. When I heard you had gone to the Flat, I feared you would meet him and resort to violence before you came to know that he was really friendly. That was what brought me here. And you know how nearly my fears were realized."

"He is friendly! Did he tell you so? What is his business out here, if he is not after me?"

"He is after you, ostensibly—in the company of Detective King."

"King! Is King here? I am lost!"

"No, King is not here. They separated; and it has been Mr. Rathbun's purpose to give you warning, and connive at your escape."

"You don't know him! He was only lying to you. He must have betrayed himself to you by accident, and then tried to quiet your fears so that he could fetch up his posse. See what you did by standing between him and my revolver! But for you, he would now be past harming me. You will have the satisfaction of reflecting that you have helped him to tie the halter about my neck!"

"Leon! Leon!"

"But I will fight them to the death! Cap will stand by me. I have his promise."

"Oh, my brother! cannot I make you see that Captain Midnight is your worst enemy? It is him alone that I fear. What an ascendency he has gained over you! Where is he leading you to? Leon, is there no hope but this descent, down! down! down! I shudder as I think of it!"

"Don't be a fool! Am I in a position to cavil about the peccadilloes of those who are willing to defend me?"

"Peccadilloes! A robber! a murderer!—everything that is terrible!"

"And the pot is to call the kettle black! Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

Mad Blackwood laughed with a reckless cynicism that thrilled his sister to the heart.

"Oh, Leon!" she cried.

"Haven't I the name of it?" he demanded. "That is all that counts in this world."

"No! no! Is the falsely-accused the same as the guilty?"

"That's all nonsense! The question is a practical one. I am hunted by the hangman. I must consort with those who dare defy the hangman."

"You need not, Leon! Let us go away. We can live in hiding. If the detective is thrown off the track now, there will be no one to pursue the matter further. You will always have me. Won't that content you?"

She asked the question tremulously. The yearning of her heart was in her voice.

"If I could escape him!" exclaimed Blackwood, with an intense longing for rest from the fears that haunted him.

"You can! you can, Leon!"

And seizing this mood, Belle urged him till she had won his consent to attempt it.

"Let me see this scoundrel Rathbun," he said, "and if I am satisfied that he means what he says, I will cut Midnight. He isn't so much to my liking as you fancy."

"Oh, I am glad of that, Leon! And I knew it. We shall be so happy!"

"One thing you will be fooled on—if you fancy that Rathbun is yearning to do a good turn from purely disinterested motives. It isn't in him. This little negotiation will involve the transfer of a valuable consideration. There is mother's plantation. He may have his eye on that."

"Let it go, if he wants it," urged Belle, blushing fiery red at her equivocation.

She quickly turned the conversation from that aspect of the matter, and so they reached the "ranch."

Once having yielded to her, Leon hung upon her suggestions. He was only too willing to assent to the wisdom of anything she proposed.

Having her personal complications with Nick Rathbun in view, she could not make very definite plans; but one thing was decided upon—they were to abandon Captain Midnight and his gang forever!

She had won him to some little manifestation of brotherly affection in the expression of his gratitude for her devotion, when Captain Midnight, who had ridden faster than the party that preceded him, arrived at the rendezvous.

He rode at once to the largest of the buildings, where were assembled in a low-ceiled room, with nothing but an earthen floor, a lot of his men—those who had accompanied him to Cony Flat, and others whom he had not thought necessary for that enterprise.

They were lounging about, smoking and gambling in a rather listless way, as if pretty generally bored with one another.

A glance showed him that Mad Blackwood was not of the number, and inquiry brought the answer that he was with his sister.

"Boys," said Captain Midnight, "can't you liven things up a bit? Let's have out something to drink. And, Jeff, what's the reason we can't have a little music? You fellows wash the cobwebs out of your throats, and give us a song or two."

The effect was magical. Everybody bright-

ened up at the mere sight of the captain. There seemed to be something contagious in his smile.

Before he left them, they were as rollicking a crowd as ever cut throats and purses.

He went directly to the shanty where Belle domiciled apart.

Beating a devil's tattoo on the door with the knuckles of both hands, he cried out cheerily:

"Come, come, Blackwood! we can't have you holding the distaff here while the boys are making a night of it. Besides, I have something to say to you. With all respect to your charming sister, I demand the unconditional surrender of her prisoner!"

At the sound of his approaching footsteps, Belle had thrown her arms about her brother's neck, pleading:

"It is the captain! Don't go with him, Leon. Please me this once!"

But Blackwood responded:

"Nonsense! Do you expect me to be tied to your apron-string all the while? Can't I be trusted to look out for myself for a moment? We have arranged to quit him. What more do you want?"

"Oh, Leon! you know his influence over you!"

"His fiddlestick!"

Then came the captain's knock, and Blackwood put the clinging arms away, and went at once to the door.

It was the rebellion of a consciously weak nature.

Belle realized that she had overreached herself, and that the chances were that he would throw himself into the dissipation all the more recklessly out of resentment for her interference, and to prove that he was master of himself.

"I am with you!" he cried. "Lead the way, my bold captain!"

"If he were not your brother, Miss Belle," said the captain, with a complimentary bow, "he would not lend himself so readily to my designs."

"As he is my brother," retorted Belle, with an assurance she was far from really feeling, "I have no cause to regard you as a rival."

"By Jove!" ejaculated the captain to himself, "she's a queen! I should like to see her with the man she gives her heart to!"

"Oh sisters have no rivals!" said Leon, with a careless laugh.

So lightly he turned away. He did not heed, perhaps did not guess, the tears and heart-ache he left behind.

"There is no hope!" she sobbed. "We shall never escape! He is lost forever! Oh, this is more terrible than the other!"

And a glance in all the halls where the carnival of reckless debauchery was in progress would have revealed a spectacle that might seem to justify her despair.

Mad Blackwood was out-reveling them all.

"I don't know who or what the fellow may be whom you were bent on slaughtering when we came upon you," Captain Midnight had said to him as soon as they were alone. "I don't care to pry into your secrets. We all have a plenty of our own; and the rule here is—no questions asked. The understanding is, that we stand by one another against all comers, be they who they may. If it is necessary to down any one, nobody will stand in the way, except to see that it is done at the proper time and place, and in the proper manner.

"You were doing it at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and in a way that was most wrong of all. I therefore let the fellow go. Everybody saw that we had no disposition to molest him."

"I reckon it is all right," answered Leon, with affected indifference. "I lost my head. I had been drinking rather freely."

Captain Midnight laughed within himself at this explanation.

"It doesn't matter whether it is or not," he replied. "If the gentleman isn't satisfied, we will wait upon him at any time, with convincing arguments."

"Meanwhile, secure her at any rate, let us drown care in the flowing bowl. Hark to the boys!"

From where she lay Belle could hear their shouts of laughter, and the music, though fortunately not the words, of their rollicking songs.

On the morrow she was not surprised to find her brother disposed to treat her with coldness.

He was correspondingly "thick" with the captain.

She saw him go away with the gang, affecting to be the most rollicking of the lot.

Then came the question of her answer to Rathbun. Must she sacrifice herself for one who showed so little appreciation of her devotion?

She did not put it to herself quite in this way. It was rather, whether the sacrifice would avail anything.

If Leon would not profit by the immunity which she purchased for him at so terrible a cost, it were fully to throw herself away on a man who, without being personally distasteful to her, was hateful viewed as a husband.

All that day she debated the question with herself, concluding that she would bring her brother and Rathbun together, and see what arrangement could be made with a clear understanding all round.

But when the time came to propose this meeting, she shrank from it.

"There is no hurry," she said to herself. "I do not have to give him my answer to-day. I will wait till to-morrow."

On the morrow she had still one day more of grace, and could not bring herself to precipitate what filled her with even more dread than before.

The third day saw a terrible battle. But love conquered.

"I have only to bear his name," she assured herself. "I will fulfill his conditions to the letter. He is an enemy. He has no right to any consideration from me. He forces the situation upon me, and must take the consequences."

It was during the suspense that followed this resolution, while she had to wait for the coming of Rathbun, and the return of her brother, so shaken by the growing terrors of the position she was about to assume that she was driven to restless wandering among the crags—it was then that she was startled by a pistol-shot, and the sounds of a frightened and riderless horse dashing toward her.

Then appeared the metal of which Bell Blackwood was composed. She knew very well the feuds of that wild section, and their bloody execution.

Here was every evidence of a tragedy, the perpetrator of which was likely to shield himself from the vengeance of Judge Lynch by another murder if necessary.

Murderer and victim were equally strangers to her.

But a single shot was not always fatal. A life might be saved. Her immediate impulse was to do what she could to succor the imperiled, if he was not indeed past help.

One thing, at least, she would endeavor to do. His murderer should not be left to creep up on him and dispatch him with a coward's blow.

In her Southern home Belle Blackwood had practiced with the revolver ever since her girlhood, and she had no fears but that she was as expert with the weapon as the violent men by whom she was surrounded.

The horse secured, she immediately began to make her way toward the spot where she had reason to believe he had lost his rider.

Keeping her revolver in hand, and her eyes on the alert, she was ready to challenge, and if need be shoot, any one whom she discovered moving suspiciously.

Reaching a point where she commanded a view of a motionless figure lying prone on the ground, she stopped, too wise to risk approaching it just yet, and exposing herself to a shot.

Every sense was now strained to catch some sign of the murderer.

At last a dislodged stone drew her eye up a neighboring acclivity, and she caught sight of a bush agitated as if by a sudden clutch.

She then got a glimpse of a man disappearing over a ridge.

She did not see his face, and he was too distant for her to recognize him, even if she had; but she got a general impression of color which was destined to satisfy her of his identity at a later meeting.

Convinced that she had nothing further to fear from him, she now advanced to the spot where his victim lay.

Superstitious people are fond of believing that presentiments go before the marked events of life; yet this girl went to her fate with no perturbation of soul other than natural pity for a fellow-being who had suffered violence at the hands of another.

At the very last, when nothing but an intervening bush hid what might be his dead face from her shrinking vision, she did not dream that she could have any ulterior interest in his fate.

She put the bush aside with a trembling hand, and stood gazing down at Spot the Sparkler; and slowly into her eyes came a look that had never dwelt there before.

He lay on his back, with his eyes closed, as if in peaceful slumber.

Only his bloodless lips, and the bleeding trace of the bullet across his temple, showed that this was not the natural repose of weariness.

For a breathless moment the girl stood gazing into his face, with her hand pressed over her heart; and then, with a sobbing cry of pity and a burst of tears, the cause of which she did not fully realize, she dropped upon her knees, and lifted his head from the ground in her arms.

Never did the head of a lover rest upon a more tumultuous bosom.

CHAPTER X.

INTO THE DEN.

SPOT sighed, and turned his head wearily.

That was the signal for maidly alarm. With a low cry and a flaming of scarlet from chin to temples, the girl eased his head to the ground again, and shrank back.

He opened his eyes, and looked at her calmly, dreamily.

She bent over him, her feeling of shyness suddenly swallowed up in the consciousness that he was alive.

"You have met with an accident," she said, in tones that were new to her voice.

Never had even her brother evoked accents of such melting flexibility.

"You are very kind," answered Spot, still in that dreamy mood. "I beg your pardon! I must have fallen asleep."

And he made an effort to rise.

A twinge of pain drove the returning blood from his face, and he sunk back with weakness.

"Oh, do not exert yourself! Let me help you, please!" exclaimed the girl, extending her trembling hands in admonition over him.

"Why, what is the matter?" he asked, putting his hand to his head. "I am so weak! And my head swims. I feel as if I were going to be ill."

"You have had a fall from your horse. Where are you most in pain? Oh, I hope that you are not seriously hurt!"

Her whole soul went out in that piteous cry.

Spot was struck by the expression of her eyes. They were eyes that one would expect to flash most readily; yet Spot thought that he had never before seen such melting pity.

"From my horse?" he repeated, vaguely.

Then, as his eyes wandered about, memory came back.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed, in surprise. "Is it possible that my wits have been wool-gathering? I am usually wide awake, or fast asleep; but, really, this time I don't seem to be able to give a very clear account of myself. How strange!"

He held up his hand and looked at it wonderingly.

"See how it trembles," he said, as if this new experience of weakness provoked him to curiosity.

"Here is some water," ventured Belle, bringing to the front a canteen which she was in the habit of carrying against a possible emergency. "I can add a dash of whisky, or give it to you straight, if you prefer, to strengthen you."

"Why, you are a walking field hospital!" exclaimed Spot, laughingly.

She laughed with him, with a gayety of heart that made her tones exquisitely liquid.

"I'll thank you for the water first," he went on. "I suppose it's an unusual thing, in this country, to prefer water to whisky. But I'm as thirsty as a fish out of its element."

She gave him the water, her hand trembling quite as much as his.

He noticed it.

"You don't make a very stout-hearted nurse," he said, with a teasing glance.

"I—I—was afraid—that you—"

She was not getting on very well; so he came to her relief.

"That I was broken in two? Well, I haven't been shamming exactly; but I don't believe I am so bad off as I look."

He moved his arms to show that they were all right, then one leg after the other.

"You see there are no broken bones, unless I have knocked a hole in my head. I reckon that got the worst of it. My horse must have stumbled."

And he winced as he touched the bruised spot on his temple.

"I have been trying conclusions with the backbone of the Continent, and have come off second best! But it is only fair to allow that I wasn't quite in condition. The fact is, I have been starving for two or three days; and that accounts for my weakness."

"Starving!"

"I have been lost in the mountains. How in the world did you come to find me? I shall be indebted to you for the trifle of my life! I reckon the coyotes would have made short meter of me to-night."

"Oh, don't speak of it!" cried Belle, shuddering with such fear that she inadvertently put her hand upon him, as if to protect him.

"I'll thank you for a pull at that whisky now, if you please. And then I'll try to sit up. It's astonishing how limp I feel!"

She gave him the stimulant, but thought it wiser not to undeceive him as yet.

"Well, old fellow!" he exclaimed, looking not unkindly at his horse, who regarded him with brute interest when Belle brought him up. "I don't suppose you meant to lay me out like this. You have been a faithful friend during these days of wandering."

But Belle was ready to help him to a sitting posture.

She slipped her arm under his neck. The other arm went about his body in the opposite direction, bringing him close into her embrace.

A moment he felt her fluttering breath, as she carefully lifted him. Then he sat thinking what a beautiful woman she was, while she steadied him with only a hand on his shoulder.

"Do you feel any pain?" she asked.

"Nothing to speak of," he answered, not speaking the exact truth. "I reckon, with a little more of your kind help, after you have rested, I can get on my feet again, and into the saddle. I'm afraid I can't offer to walk while you ride."

"Oh, don't think of me! And it has not tired me to lift you. When you have breathed, and taken a little more of the whisky, we'll try it."

"Are you following Eve's example?" he asked, smiling, as he took the flask from her.

"God forbid!" she exclaimed, with a depth of passion which showed that she had had reason, as so many suffering women have, to hate the demon of the still.

Before her imagination rose the picture of the brother she loved so devotedly. Wine had been the curse of his existence. It had led him to where he stood that day, hunted for his life!

"It is a good Jack-at-a-pinch," said Spot, "but a mighty bad chum, and a worse master."

When he was ready she aided him to his feet, and he stood with one hand grasping the pom-mel of his saddle, and the other arm resting along her shoulders.

She stood within the circle of his arm, trembling with secret delight, afraid to meet his glance while in that position, lest she betray herself even more fully.

"I should be all right," he panted, "if it wasn't for my head. It swims like a—like a balloon! Did you ever see one raised on a gusty day?"

He spoke with off-hand playfulness, as if to disguise what the effort cost him.

If she had been more self-possessed she would have noticed this, and spoken her sympathy.

But while she rested within his arm, though not in an embrace, she could not find words, nor even thoughts.

Her brain was in a whirl with the one consciousness of his proximity.

She felt the rise and fall of his laboring breast. She fancied that she could feel the beating of his heart.

"Well, I sha'n't gain anything by standing here," he went on, presently. "If I don't get into that saddle without much more delay, I don't believe I shall be able to accomplish it at all."

"Oh, if I were only stronger!" she breathed.

"There isn't one woman in a thousand your equal! You left scarcely anything for me to do. You almost lifted me bodily. Don't exert yourself so again."

He put his foot into the stirrup, and then with a new thought, said:

"I'll tell you what you may do. You can't help me much on this side anyway, you know. But go on the other side of the horse, and prevent me from overdoing it, and falling on that side. That is really the only danger. You see, it's all the swimming of my head."

She did as she was bid, gazing at him with a pitying apprehension that told her secret with a thousand tongues.

Gathering himself for a concentrated effort, he rose in the stirrup, only to fall across the saddle breathless.

With a cry of alarm Belle caught him in her arms.

"All right!" he gasped—"all right!"

Then he managed to get his leg over, and lay panting on his horse's neck, the perspiration standing in beads on his forehead.

"Oh, I should not have tried to get you to the house without help!" she exclaimed, remorsefully. "But I should have had to wait so long."

Spot smiled to reassure her.

"I am all right," he declared. "Let me get my breath, and you will see that I am as steady as a church."

But the ride to the "ranch" that followed taxed him to the utmost.

He did not attempt to sit erect, but lay on the neck of his horse, Belle supporting and steady-ing him to the best of her ability, as she walked beside the horse.

However, his exhaustion—for it was that more than pain—was not so great as to exclude a train of thought provoked by her vicinity.

As he lay with his face turned toward her, he had an exceptionally favorable opportunity to observe her.

Believing him absorbed in suffering, she was not so much on her guard; and waves of emotion flitted over her face undisguised.

Then there was her speaking eye constantly lifting to his face to watch for signs of pain, and the sympathetic modulations of her voice in broken ejaculations as he winced with some unavoidable shock.

So this was the girl about whom so many dubious stories were in circulation. It was she that he himself had seen shoot at a man in her eagerness to intercept a meeting between him and her brother.

She was a very woman in her pity; and yet Spot could not fail to see that there was something almost feline about it.

How intensely black her eyes were. How they flashed for an instant, as she caught the bridle-rein to check the horse after an unguarded stumble.

The instant after they melted over Spot, and her voice was as soft as the crooning of a dove with a solicitude over the shock he had sustained.

Spot was not a coxcomb. It did not occur to him that her interest in him was exceptional.

Was it possible, then, that one so tender-hearted could knowingly play the decoy for a gang of bloodthirsty cut-throats?

This reflection brought up a picture of his

own destination. She was taking him into the very den of that sinister crew!

"By Jove! I have been so taken with her beauty and womanly tenderness that I forgot that!" he mused. "Granted that she is kindly disposed; will Captain Midnight be as civil as before, when I meet him in his own haunt?"

But the situation was desperate. It was this succor, or nothing.

Arriving at a group of rude structures which looked like an abandoned sheep-ranch adapted to the wants of a different set of tenants, the girl took him to one of the smaller huts that stood somewhat apart.

Here, as he slid from the saddle, she received him in her arms, and almost carried him across the threshold.

It proved to be divided into two rooms, with probably a windowless attic above.

The one immediately entered from without was plainly the sleeping apartment of a man.

A pair of top boots stood at the head of the bunk built against the wall. A saddle lay in one corner. A repeating rifle was supported in rests over the fireplace. Masculine apparel hung on wooden pegs.

There was also a table here, and indications that the room was used for eating, though not regularly for housekeeping.

Here the girl hesitated a moment, and then with a sudden resolve opened the door leading to the other apartment, and conducted Spot into it.

"You will be more comfortable in here," she said, in half apology, or explanation.

A glance showed Spot that this, as rudely appointed as the other, had yet an air of refinement and coziness imparted to it by those indescribable touches which distinguish the sanctuary of one of the gentler sex.

"Oh, but you are too kind!" he protested. "There is no need of my dispossessing you. The other will do as well."

"It will be no inconvenience to me," she answered, without further explanation.

He was too exhausted for a contest of politeness; and as she led him to the bunk, he sank back upon it, panting with utter prostration.

She drew off his boots, and assisted him to a reposeful posture; then said:

"I will bring you some food directly. Is there anything I can do for your comfort before I go?"

"I am a little sharp-set!" he admitted, with a wan smile. "Otherwise, with my head at last where it can rest still, I believe I have not another earthly wish!"

She went out, gazing back at him with a look of tender solicitude; and that was the last he remembered of her for some time.

When she returned with the food he was sound asleep, and she did not rouse him.

His last thought of her had been the wonder whether she had been prompted to bring him into the inner apartment the better to defend his life against the assaults of her ruffianly companions.

Whether this was so or not, it was plain that her prompting had been love; for, seeing that he was unconscious and so could not know of her self-revelation, she dropped on her knees at the side of the bunk, to gaze at him with clasped hands and humid eyes.

She had not yet dressed the wound on his temple, having left it till the first cravings of his hunger had been appeased.

She now bent over him, touched the spot with her lips, and left a tear upon it.

An hour later she woke him; gave him some gruel and a sip more of the whisky; bathed the blood from his temple, to find that that was no serious matter; and advised that he undress and go properly to bed.

Later she brought him some eggs on toast, and after another interval indulged him in a scant allowance of stewed meat.

The result of this alternate eating and sleeping was a recovery of the zest of healthful life so rapid as to astonish him.

It was after nightfall—he did not know how long—and he lay in a luxurious half-drowse, when he heard the arrival of a party of horsemen.

"Now is the hour," he said to himself, "which will decide my fate!"

CHAPTER XI.

A REBUFFED LOVER.

WHILE Spot the Sparkler slept, Belle Blackwood was passing through the crisis of her life.

Thus far her devotion for her brother had so filled her heart, that she had never had any serious thought of that transforming passion which in the natural order of things must come to her some time.

Of course vague dreams of that other life which lay beyond the sunset of maidenhood had flitted before her fancy. But it had seemed a far-away future which it was unmaidenly to anticipate.

Not that Nick Rathbun was the first lover by many who had pressed for consideration. Her beauty had won many a sigh.

But she had laughed her wooers away with a

gay incredulity as to the seriousness of their wounds, herself plainly only amused at their rueful expostulations.

So it happened that, with no knowledge of her own nature, she came upon the man who was to conquer her at a glance.

She found that love was a compound of flame and ice, the quick alternations of which filled her with a bewildering whirl of emotion, now a foretaste of heaven, now an agony of fear, and now a fathomless depth of sadness.

She could not stay where Spot was; she could not endure to remain away from him.

In his presence she was afraid of herself; out of sight of him, she feared some stroke of fate that would pierce her heart through him.

One moment she would flee away, as if to hide herself in the depths of the mountain wilderness. But, as if bound by a tether, when she reached its end she could scarcely restrain her winged feet from bearing her back with a precipitancy at which she felt a strange mingling of delight and shame.

So engrossing was the passion of the hour, that, oddly enough, it banished Nick Rathbun entirely from her thoughts.

It was not till the force of habit had taken her to the shore of the lakelet where he had come upon her, to look out over the water at the sunset, that the strange issue between them flashed across her mind.

"He is coming for my decision!" she cried within herself.

And she stood breathless with dismay.

"To be his wife!"

A wild fear seized her.

"He cannot compel me! Nobody can compel me!"

She gazed about. Had the world no hiding-place from his demands?

As she had told him, he was not then repugnant to her. But now she shrank with shuddering repulsion from the thought of his touch.

"But he is coming! He may be already near! This is the hour, this the place!"

Then a fierce hatred distorted her face, and made her eyes gleam.

"Let him come! He will find that his frowns have no terrors for me!"

And she clutched the weapon that lay secreted in her vesture.

But the thought of his anger brought after it the thought of his retaliation.

"My brother!" she gasped.

Then her heart went out in a great cry.

"Leon! Leon! Leon!"

And she stretched out her arms in appeal to the vision conjured before her imagination.

The words she had used to Rathbun recurred to her.

"My brother, or myself! But this sacrifice—oh, this! What was the giving of myself, before I knew! But now! Oh! oh! oh!"

She fell to wringing her hands and moaning in despair.

It was not merely a selfish repining at the wreck of her happiness. But to love was to be consecrated to the beloved.

"It would be defilement to let another call me wife! I should not be his wife! Nothing could make me such! I belong to—"

Like a flash of lightning came the thought that the man to whom she had given herself so unreservedly had never claimed her love.

She dropped her face in her hands, afame with shame.

But there came the reflection that love is its own justification; and she stood erect again, the hot color still in her cheeks, but her eyes flashing in proud defiance.

"Whether he claim me or not, I am his!" she said, aloud, as if braving all the world.

And the words reached the ears of a man who had been for some minutes watching her from the depths of a covert near at hand.

"Whether he claims her or not!" repeated Nick Rathbun, reflectively. "I have already claimed her. There can be no doubt in my case. Then who is this problematic claimant?"

His face darkened. A slumberous fire began to glow in his eyes.

"She is making a very desperate fight of it. The fellow, whoever he is, must have made deep inroads into her affections. I wonder if this has been going on for three days? But this is the upshot of it—she has resolved to throw over her brother!"

Not so quickly, however. She had just come to the consideration of him.

But the situation was different from what it had been when Nick last saw her.

Ever since the trial in which Captain Midnight's influence had prevailed over hers, Leon had shown the resentment of a weak nature whose vanity has been wounded.

"From this time out," he had said, "I propose to run myself without your interference. With Captain Midnight I cast my lot; and if Nick Rathbun or anybody else wants me, here's where he will find me!"

This decision had filled her with despair. It was the announcement that, whatever his past life had been, Blackwood had now set his feet to a path that led evermore downward.

She had not thought of abandoning him. He might drag her through a life of criminal vio-

lence; but she would never desert her post, or cease her efforts to save him.

Meanwhile, should she still bribe Nick Rathbun to passiveness? And if so, how could she do it, and yet remain with her brother?

This had been the problem of those three days, till she came upon Spot the Sparkler.

But now what? With the sacrifice increased a hundred-fold, should she still forego all for the slender chance of breaking up Leon's affiliation with the allies he had chosen?

"Oh, I cannot! I cannot!" she cried, striking her hands together in an anguish of spirit.

"I hope that that is not the answer you have brought to me, Miss Marquardt," said Nick Rathbun, now revealing himself.

The girl whirled upon him with blazing eyes; but by an effort she regained self-control, and replied with a sneer so fine that her words disguised it:

"No, not quite."

"Ah!" ejaculated her lover, thrilled with a wild hope. "Is it possible—"

"My answer," she interposed, ruthlessly trampling upon his enthusiasm, "is, not that I cannot, but that I will not."

The man who had started to cast himself at her feet in an ebullition of gratitude, recoiled with a black frown of resentment.

"You will not!"

"I will not."

"You could have put it more gently," he suggested, his nostrils white and quivering.

"The important thing is to put it clearly," she answered.

"And your brother?"

"Is amply able to take care of himself."

"And that has determined you? Excuse me if I express the belief that you have concluded to sacrifice him!"

"Allow me to correct you, and say that I have concluded not to sacrifice myself. The only wonder with me now is, that I should have tolerated the thought for a moment."

And she looked at him with a loathing born of her new love.

Rathbun quivered under the lash of her disgust, and blazed into fiery wrath.

"Do you imagine that you are deceiving me?" he cried. "I know that it is not your brother who stands between us—"

"No," she interrupted, quickly. "It is yourself!"

And the glance that swept him from head to foot was like a streak of fire.

"It is one to whom I shall henceforth give my undivided time, till I hold his heart in my hand! Ah, you blanch! Your brother! Faugh! But I have you now!"

The color had gone from Belle's cheek at the menace against the man she loved.

The look and tone with which Rathbun hurled it were so fiendishly ruthless that she quailed with a deathly sinking of the heart.

But she rallied hotly the next instant.

"Mr. Rathbun," she said, with a glance that met his unflinchingly, "if you dare to meddle with me personally, you will find that you have undertaken to stroke an adder! Do you think that, because I am a woman, I cannot kill?"

And she looked fully equal to it.

"Let us understand each other," he replied. "From this moment I devote myself to a single purpose. Hear me swear never to rest till I have the heart's blood of the man who has supplanted me!"

"Supplanted you!" she laughed, scornfully.

"You are given to a very comical abuse of language."

"There will be no doubt about my actions!"

The retort was so savage, it suddenly occurred to her that by letting this man escape she was leaving a human bloodhound on her lover's track.

Why should she not protect him, as from a wild beast?

With scarcely the guidance of her will, her hand sought the folds of her dress.

But Rathbun was before her.

"Oh, now you are ready for murder!" he jeered. "By so much more dear is this brother—of some one else! Well, with so much the greater hatred will I hunt him! So much more into nothingness will I crush him when I have him in my power!"

His revolver was out and cocked. He held the drop on her as if she were a man. Of course her sex did not make her any less dangerous.

But now came an interruption—sounds of the return of Captain Midnight and his men.

"You have your answer," she said. "Do your worst!"

And turning, she ran toward the house.

"Now to find out who this fellow is," reflected Rathbun, after he had vented his rage to little purpose verbally. "It must be one of these cut-throats. I have watched her too closely for her to have stolen meetings with any one from Cony Flat. Suppose it is this Captain Midnight? He is a most likely fellow. He has the strength and dash that might strike the fancy of such a woman. I shall have my hands full, if it is he. She will warn him against me; and then it will be a matter of shooting on sight. I don't believe there is much danger of

Judge Lynch if I do down him. That's one comfort. But, Judge Lynch, or no Judge Lynch, I'll have him, if he prove to be my meat!"

And he ground his teeth with the resolve to do or die.

"This is my chance!" he ejaculated, with a sudden thought. "I will see her meeting with him!"

He at once set out to gain a position near the buildings occupied by the gang, running the risk of being smelt out and betrayed by some dog.

But this danger was not encountered. Hidden by the gathering darkness, he gained a position near the stable, where he made a discovery which told him that there was a new man in the field—one who had evaded his vigilance, and penetrated to the very citadel of the fortress he was beleaguered.

He saw Belle come from the stable, accompanied by her brother and Captain Midnight, and crept after them till she turned before the door of the hut where Spot lay, to prepare them for what they would find within.

Then her words and manner told him all he wished to know; and when the three had entered the house, he shook his fist toward it, muttering:

"I have you, curse you! You won her in the flash of an eye; you will lose her in the flash of a pistol!"

And running no further risk of discovery by the men who were within earshot of him all around, he set out for his horse, swearing vengeance at every step.

Spot the Sparkler, though no fault of his own, had another enemy, full as dangerous as Bully Bill.

Meanwhile, let us see how Blackwood met his first rival in his sister's heart.

CHAPTER XII.

"A COLD DEAL."

"You all understand, boys?"

"You bet, Cap!"

"And you are all provided with your pebbles?"

"Every mother's son of us!"

"See that you don't bungle. Here he comes!"

Captain Midnight sat mounted in the midst of his men.

Leon Blackwood issued from the saloon of the Fair Play House, and swung into the saddle, unsuspecting of any intrigue in which he was concerned only as a victim.

The time was the afternoon of the eventful day which brought Belle Blackwood to the man who was destined to win her heart, and for whose blood her brother was soon to thirst.

It was plain that Blackwood was greatly disturbed. He was flushed with drinking; his features worked spasmodically; every movement was a start.

"I tell you, Cap," he declared, as he rode forward at his chief's side, "a thunderclap is ready to burst over my head! I feel it in the air!"

"Nonsense!" sneered the captain. "Hang presentiments! You've got the megrims!"

"Presentiment or not, I tell you I'm approaching a crisis!"

"Haven't you got over your scare about that fellow yet? Suppose he had a dozen sheriffs at his back? If sheriffs were bugbears, we'd none of us sleep o' nights!"

And the captain laughed with comfortable complacency.

"When my time comes," declared Blackwood, doggedly, "nothing will stand between me and my doom!"

"Well, then, by the same rule there is no chance of your anticipating your doom. What's the reason you shouldn't have some fun while you are waiting for it?"

"Fun!" groaned Blackwood.

"Certainly. You yourself said you wanted diversion. You'll never have a better chance to begin. The coach will be along to-night."

Blackwood shuddered.

"Why do you harp on that accursed coach?"

"Hello! Here's a fellow who quarrels with his grub, and who kicks at dancing to the tune of his own choosing!"

The captain was only bantering, as usual. Blackwood took him seriously.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose I ought to pay my share to the piper, if I dance with you fellows."

"Nonsense!" cried Captain Midnight. "You do as you please. There's plenty to jump at the chance, if you don't like it. I thought you wanted a moderate stirring-up."

"I'll do it!" declared Blackwood.

"You'll stand your chance with the rest, if you say so," amended Captain Midnight.

"Chance?"

"By lot."

"Ah!"

Blackwood caught at that idea.

"Let it be that!" he exclaimed, eagerly. "It will decide my fate! If I am appointed to this thing, I will know that I am a doomed man. If not, I will admit that you are right."

"What do you say, boys, to drawing lots for the coach?" called Captain Midnight.

"Give me a show, Cap!" petitioned one of his followers.

"No; let it be lots," objected another.

"Lots! lots! lots!" called several voices.

"All right. Lots it is," decided the captain. Leaping from his horse, he proceeded to gather some pebbles in his hat from the bed of a half-dry watercourse.

"Now, boys," he said, shaking the hat as he advanced, "the fellow who gets the lucky stone—a black pebble—goes for the coach. Stand in a line with your backs to me, and as I go along, you reach behind without looking, and draw your lot."

His men fell into line, as requested, with laughter and joking.

Only Blackwood sat his horse gloomily.

"Eh, Blackwood? What's the matter with you?" cried his chief.

"Let them all choose," answered Blackwood. "If the lot is left for me after so many, it will be the more decisive."

He paid no attention to the drawing, as he heard each man execrate his luck, the general desire apparently being to play the leading role in the enterprise which was then at issue. He did not see that each hand already held a pebble when it went into the hat, and that this was the one displayed as if drawn, the one actually taken from the hat being dropped out of sight into the palm. So he had no suspicion that the whole thing was "a put-up job," all the pebbles in the hat being black, so that, whenever his turn came, he could not fail to draw the "lucky" lot, while the others were all provided in advance with white pebbles to display.

"Come, Blackwood," said the captain, when all but he had drawn. "There are two left—one for you, and one for me."

"Draw for yourself," answered Blackwood. "I know the decision in advance."

"Here, Jim! You draw for me," said the captain. "We'll have to humor his nibs. But I'll bet any man two to one that he don't get it after all."

He did, though, of course, that being the pre-arrangement.

"You are in luck, man!" cried the captain.

"What will you take for your chance?"

"Come on!" growled Blackwood, digging his spurs into his horse's flanks.

They rode away; and as Captain Midnight spurred up to his subordinate's side, he saw that this little farce had not contributed to calm his nerves.

Blackwood now looked haggard and wild.

"Let it come!" he ejaculated, his nostrils dilating. "If it is she, I will kill myself! It's a pity I didn't do it long ago!"

"Gammon!" scoffed the captain. "Do you suppose that there is only one woman in the world? How absurd to imagine that this particular one—"

"Captain Midnight, I am a man going to his doom, as sure as you live!"

"But the description! Why, it would answer for any woman. I've heard Jack rave in that way a hundred times."

"The description has nothing to do with it. It is enough that it is a woman of any kind. There is but one coming for me!"

"Well, you're the hardest case I ever tackled! I give you up."

Blackwood rode on in moody silence; and the captain took up another line of argument.

"Suppose it were this bugaboo. She could never know you. You will be disguised."

"She knows my voice as well as I do myself."

"We'll fix that. A pebble or two will make not only an unknown, but an unknowable Demosthenes of you."

Blackwood did not think the matter worth discussing.

So they reached the ranch, where their disguises were to be assumed.

They gained the stable before Belle intercepted them; and the discovery of the horse Spot the Sparkler had ridden was announced by an ejaculation of surprise.

"Hello, Cap! What's this hyar? A strange hoss?"

"It's Thad Burchard's cream-an'-mullasses," declared a second of the men, alluding to the conspicuous marking of the animal.

"We hain't got no use fur this hyar. Who's run it in? It'll prove a mighty inconvenient lift, boys."

"It's a mule's hind foot!" laughed a third. "You kin have it ef you kin keep it!"

The men crowded into the stable in eager curiosity, Captain Midnight taking the matter more quietly.

He had not time to express his opinion before he felt a hand laid on his arm.

"It is all right," said Belle, at his elbow.

"Will you come to my shanty—you and Leon?"

The captain was willing to await her communication; but her brother broke in impetuously:

"How did you come by the horse, Belle?"

"Come with me, and I will tell you," she answered, reaching out her hand, and putting it affectionately on his arm.

He did not notice any unusual tenderness in her manner. He was so used to it that, if she followed the natural instinct to win him to a

compliant frame of mind, the exaggeration would have had to be very marked indeed to fix his attention.

"Aren't you feeling well, Leon?" she asked.

"Don't bother about me!" he growled, churlishly shaking off her hand. "Why can't you tell us about the horse, and have done with it? We are in a hurry."

"I will detain you but a moment," answered Belle, in the same gen'le tones with which she always received her brother's impatient, almost harsh, treatment.

Captain Midnight had been very much struck by this. It seemed so at variance with her whole nature.

"It just shows what a fool a woman can be over a man," he reflected. "She is an emotional dynamite bomb, or I lose my guess; and he kicks her about like an old football. If she would explode on him once, I believe it would bring him to his senses."

But there seemed no prospect of her trying the experiment, as she led the way to the house she and her brother occupied in common.

Just before the door, where they were out of earshot of the men left at the stable, she stopped and faced them.

"Perhaps I had better tell you, before you enter, what you will find," she began, her voice now somewhat unsteady with anxiety as to the reception of her intelligence. "A stranger."

Her voice died away, as if her courage failed her.

"A stranger!" cried her brother. "What stranger? What is he doing in here? Who is it?"

Surprise, perplexity, alarm, were in his voice and manner.

It increased as he went on, so that he gave her no time to answer.

"What did he say? What is he like? Have you never seen him before? You know King. But of course he would be in disguise. He is in here, is he? Well, he will get more than he came for! Why did you not warn us? Of course he isn't fool enough to trust himself here alone."

He drew his revolvers, looking fierce and wild with murderous resolve.

"Stop! stop!" interposed Belle. "It is no one with whom you have any concern. You have never seen him before, nor he you."

"I will satisfy myself of that, if you please! Open the door, and let me see him from here. If he is after me, he had better never have been born—curse him!"

He was quite wild with fear and hatred.

"Listen to me!" pleaded Belle. "The gentleman is here by accident. I brought him here—"

"You? What for? You know that no one is to come here. He is a spy, I tell you!"

"Do spies first allow themselves to be thrown from their horses, and nearly killed? When I found him, he was unconscious. Besides, he is so weak with starvation that he can hardly stand. He has been lost in the mountain."

Even to her brother she did not reveal the attempted assassination.

"He is a fraud, and has made a fool of you! But he will find that he has some one else to deal with now. Open the door, and let him speak for himself—if by this time he has not slipped out of the back window."

"Be reasonable, Leon!—and lower your voice. The man is asleep. I have told you here so that he should not be disturbed."

"Come, come, Blackwood," interposed Captain Midnight. "There are a few men in the world yet, not connected with your pet bugaboo. Let us see who this is."

Belle opened the door.

Her brother was the last to enter.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TUG OF WAR.

"WELL," demanded Blackwood, a glance showing him that the room was not occupied, "where is your patient? He seems to have walked off on his broken legs, after all!"

"He is in the other room. Speak lower, Leon."

"What? In where? What is he doing in there?"

"I put him there."

"And I will pull him out!"

"Leon!"

"Stand aside, you foolish girl! What am I to think of you? You must be beside yourself!"

"Leon, stop!"

For the first time in his life he saw her stand before him as if she had suddenly turned into a rock of obstruction.

Her voice had sunk to a low, intense, hoarse murmur. Her face was as white as death.

He stared at her in amazement.

"Good, good!" cried Captain Midnight to himself. "He has called her out at last. Now, my gentle fire-eater, let's see how you will make out. I wish I could signal a bet to one of the boys."

Belle spoke again before her astonished brother could find voice.

"You cannot cross that threshold, Leon, in that mood. The gentleman—an unmistakable gentleman—is ill; and I will not have him disturbed."

"And do you mean to say that you have given up your chamber to the occupancy of a strange man?"

Blackwood had been brought up to very chivalrous notions as to the sanctity of women and of their immediate belongings; and it seemed scarcely credible to him that his sister could do anything not in keeping with his sense of the most extreme maidenly reserve.

"Well, he's no slouch, at any rate!" reflected Captain Midnight, watching the working of Blackwood's face with admiration.

Then his glance returned to Belle.

He had no doubt as to the justification of her action; but he was curious to see how she would meet the implied reproach in her brother's manner, even more than in his words.

She stood proudly erect, looking him steadily in the eye.

"I could make him more comfortable there," she said, simply.

"But he could be comfortable here, if not with the men," insisted Leon.

"Confound him!" muttered Captain Midnight to himself. "He is too hard on her. What difference does it make where she put the stranger?"

Belle hesitated. Her eye wandered from her brother's face to that of the observant captain.

With a generous impulse to spare her feelings, Captain Midnight dropped his eyes.

But she would not let the matter rest so. Her eyes flashed fire; and she sprung to a sudden resolve.

"You force me to speak," she said, her voice quivering, "and you shall have my reasons without wincing!"

Captain Midnight now looked at her again, fully persuaded that she was capable of taking care of herself.

Her brother looked at her coldly, with no apparent expectation that she could vindicate herself in his eyes.

"There are sinister stories in circulation about this place," she said. "They have reached even my ears."

She turned toward Captain Midnight, leveling at him glances of steady defiance that won his unbounded admiration.

"Stories of men who have mysteriously disappeared—the victims of foul play, as it is believed. It is even bruited about that I am here in the capacity of a decoy!"

Leon broke in upon her with an explosive: :

"Impossible!"

He turned to Captain Midnight, as if to hold him responsible for the outrage.

The captain took the matter with his wonted composure, quite undismayed by Blackwood's truculent stare.

"How did such a calumny come to your ears, may I ask?" he said, respectfully, though coolly.

"By the merest accident—an overheard dialogue, when I did not care to reveal my presence."

The facts were that, while wandering alone in the vicinity, she had hidden at the approach of some persons, who proved to be members of the gang, and had so overheard their laughing comments on the suspicious rife at Cony Flat.

"But what has this to do with the case in hand?" demanded Blackwood, reverting to the matter which interested him most.

"This," answered Belle, steadily. "I have reason to fear that there may be some foundation to the stories to which I have alluded."

"You think us a gang of cut-throats," interposed Captain Midnight, without any particular disturbance.

"I am resolved to take no chances in the matter," replied Belle, looking him squarely in the eye. "The man in yonder is under my protection. I believed that he would be more secure in there than here."

"I hope," she went on, turning to her brother with cutting sarcasm, "that my motives will meet with your approval."

"Well!" laughed Captain Midnight to himself, "I am content, my boy, if you are!"

But Leon was far from content. Indeed, his face showed that the matter stood even worse with him.

"You are very solicitous—for a stranger!" he sneered fiercely. "But there are no grounds for your fears."

"They were sufficient for me."

"Whether there are or not, that is no place for him, whoever he is. Come! let us have him out of there!"

He took a step toward her, as if to brush her out of his path.

But, standing with her back to the door of communication, she extended her left hand in opposition, while, with a face as white as marble, and eyes glittering, she said:

"Stop! You cannot go further in that mood!"

"Octavia!"

In his anger he forgot the *alias* by which she passed in that company.

She answered him without flinching, yet still with a recognition of the natural tie between them.

"You cannot, Leon—believe me! I have never opposed you before!"

"Will you force me to offer you violence?"

"I stand here with my life, Leon."

Her dilating eyes had a suggestion of mania in them. There was terror in her quivering voice, but also inflexible resolve.

Captain Midnight felt a thrill of horror as he looked at her strained features.

"With my life!" cried her brother, starting back in dismay. "Wretched girl! is it possible that you would take the life of your own brother!—and for a stranger! My God! what have we come to? It is a judgment! The archfiend has taken possession of us! It is the curse of murder!"

For as he pressed upon her she had slipped her hand into the folds of her dress, where he knew that she carried weapons with which she was sufficiently skilled to have no doubt of her ability to amply protect herself, even in that wild country.

"No living being shall cross that threshold with hostile intent while I live to prevent it!" she declared. "I would cross even your path with fire and steel first!"

"It is the curse of murder!" he repeated, sinking dejectedly into a chair. "I am responsible!"

He let his head fall upon his arms on the table, and his body was shaken by a storm of spasmodic sobs.

With a low cry of remorseful protest, the girl sprung forward, and casting herself on her knees, threw her arms about him.

"Oh! no, no, Leon!—dear Leon!" she cried. "Can you forgive me? Oh, you do not believe that I would have actually hurt you! I was beside myself, Leon! Listen to me! I did not mean to harm you! Oh, I could not have done it! Dear Leon! Oh, my darling brother!"

Quite forgetful of Captain Midnight, she had forced herself up under the drooping figure of her brother, till she dragged the bowed head off the table to pillow it on her shoulder. Thus she fell to kissing him in pledge of her unshaken love.

"Good heavens!" cried the captain to himself. "The man who kindles the fire of that other love in her heart will have a champion when he is in trouble! I wonder if that lucky fellow in yonder has done it already! What else would have induced her to threaten the very life of that vagabond she is now breaking her heart over? Hang him! But then I don't suppose a brother ever appreciates a sister at her true worth. Heyday! I wish I had a sister of that sort! I'd much rather she were my sweetheart, though—on reflection. Wouldn't she make a queen to fight the world with! But I'm getting into heroics. I'd better pull in a yard or two of sentiment!"

Meanwhile Belle was sobbing over her brother. "Haven't I loved you all your life, my darling?"

And that strange mixture of weakness and violence allowed her to soothe him.

Broken with remorse, he leaned upon the accustomed staff of her stronger nature, which upheld him now in his manhood as it had supported him through all his turbulent childhood and youth.

"Do not reproach yourself!" she murmured. "You have me. You know I shall never fail you. I have never doubted you, Leon. You know that."

He did know it: but the assurance caused him to shudder; and he put her away.

She was so used to such ungracious rebuffs that she was not hurt by it now. All her life she had made excuses for him. Now she laid it to the anguish of a man under a false accusation.

Blackwood rose to his feet, outwardly calm.

"Let me see your patient," he said. "I will not disturb him."

With a piteous look of appeal in his eyes, the girl went at once and opened the door.

She looked to see that Spot was still seemingly asleep, and then beckoned the others to enter.

Now there was a significant playing of color in her wan cheeks, and fluttering of breath between her parted lips.

Like them, in wavering uncertainty, was the tremulous wariness with which she hovered near and almost directly in the path of her brother, plainly with misgivings, while she tried to make it appear that she trusted him.

Captain Midnight went in last.

"I will frustrate Mr. Leon," he promised himself, and the girl mutely, "if he tries to trick you!"

Spot lay as if asleep, with his face in the full light of the candle that burned on his hostess's dressing-table—a rude affair enough, yet graced with those touches known only to womanly taste.

A glance, and Blackwood started back with a spasmodic distortion of his countenance.

Then a swift leaning forward, and a stare of searching scrutiny.

Lastly, a low, hoarse, rasping roar, which was yet scarcely more than a harsh exhalation of breath; and a gathering, like a tiger about to spring.

His hand flew to his belt, and clutched the hilt of a bowie.

Spot the Sparkler lay with his eyes closed.

Not the quiver of a muscle betrayed that he was awake.

CHAPTER XIV.

BETWEEN TWO LOVES.

On going to bed, Spot the Sparkler had taken a precaution quite natural under the circumstances.

"A revolver is a mighty comfortable bed-fellow, in a strange house, and especially in so shady a one as this!" had been his reflection.

And without fear of having too much of even a good thing for once in his life, he had taken two to bed with him.

"A deuced pretty girl, and as tender a nurse as could be wished," he had conceded. "But she has proved herself exceptionally handy with firearms; and her companions may not take so kindly to me as she appears to. I hope I may have the good luck to be awake when they drop in to pass upon my intrusion into their den."

He lay facing the door by which they must enter, with only a single fold of a blanket covering the muzzle of the revolver he had in his right hand.

From her stormy interview with Nick Rathbun, Belle had sped to the house to see if he was asleep, with a view to arranging her interview with her brother so as to avoid a scene which might prejudice the man whom she most longed to please.

Her anxiety was betrayed to Spot by her rapid breathing; and when she was gone, he fell to speculating as to the meaning of this extreme caution.

"Does she want them to come upon me in my sleep? Or does she intend to keep them in ignorance of my presence here? Either way, it looks squarely for me! If she brings them here, it will probably be to cut my throat; and if she tries to keep them away, it will prove that she thinks they will do it if they find me out. In the one case she does not wish to protect me; in the other she cannot. Therefore it behooves me to look out for myself."

In an ordinary western house Spot would have been able to overhear the dialogue which was carried on in the next room; but in this the partition was thoroughly battened and the door listed, to secure warmth in the trying mountain winter; and the words came to him muffled.

However, tones betray emotion; and he gathered that Belle was expostulating in opposition to the insistence of her brother, Captain Midnight putting in a word now and then, the import of which he could not guess.

Only when Belle stood with her back against the door, and in the excitement of the moment raised her voice, previously guarded, her articulations reached his strained ears distinctly.

He heard her menace her brother in his bedchamber.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed. "Here's a champion! She was ready to shoot that fellow the other night in defense of her brother, and now she has six inches of cold steel—Eh! what's that?"

It was Belle's cry of remorseful tenderness, as she fell at her brother's feet.

"A very woman after all! That was a heart cry. She loves that villain altogether too well. But what a dynamite bomb she is, to be sure! Hush! She's coming in here to see if they have waked me!"

Spot instantly set himself to meet the girl's expectations, and therefore probably her wish, by pretending to be asleep.

The next instant he knew that he had voluntarily put his foot into a trap.

"She is going to admit them! Why the deuce does she want them to see me in my sleep? Shall I humor her?—at the risk of my life!"

Out of pure chivalry, because she was a lady who had won his admiration, he resolved to take long chances.

But if he had ever needed nerve, he needed it then—to lie with closed eyes, and estimate the distance of possible enemies by listening to the sound of their cautious tread!

Would he have sufficient warning if one of them sprung at him with a knife? A revolver might be drawing, and a bullet sent crashing through his brain, and he never know it this side of eternity!

Then came the smothered roar of rage and terror from Blackwood, and his sister's cry of alarm.

They were followed by the sounds of a scuffle.

Spot's eyelids quivered convulsively. What should he do? Was his life in instant peril? If he waited, and the blow fell, what would greet him on the other side?

At the instant when the instinct of self-preservation was mastering all his fortitude, he heard Belle, in a voice of smothered anguish, pray:

"Hold him!—oh, hold him!"

What was not she suffering, to have the man she loved awake to find her brother struggling to murder him in his sleep!

"He's fast enough!" replied Captain Midnight, in a voice strained with the exertions he was putting forth, yet coolly confident of success.

True to his word, he had kept at Leon's heels, so that when the madman gathered himself for his spring, he recoiled into a pair of arms that clasped him about like bands of steel.

"Let me go!" growled Blackwood, in the exasperated voice of one taxed beyond his strength. "I'll kill him! He is the second one, curse him!"

"Don't be a fool!" admonished the captain, unceremoniously.

And with the same address he had shown in disposing of Nick Rathbun when his room was more desirable than his company, he now carried Blackwood bodily out of not only the room, but the house.

Belle followed, closing the door after her.

The reaction now showed to what a tension Spot the Sparkler's nerves had been wrought.

He not only opened his eyes, but sat abruptly upright in bed, beads of sweat suddenly starting out on his forehead.

"Well!" he ejaculated, "that's a moment to be remembered!"

Meanwhile Belle had followed her brother and his captor out of the house.

Leon raged furiously, but vainly.

"Is every one about me to presume to interfere with me? Let me go, I say. Curse you! I'll meet you with the weapons of a gentleman, though I am no match for your brute strength. You shall pay for this insult!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Captain Midnight, releasing the madman when he had him securely out-of-doors. "I'll give you satisfaction whenever you say, with dynamite bombs, at two paces."

"You don't know what you're doing," insisted Blackwood, but ignoring his challenge. "Of all men on earth, I hate him most!"

"But, my dear boy, somebody hates everybody. Suppose we had a general slaughter all round, letting only those survive who have no enemies? There wouldn't be a decent man left on earth."

"I'll kill him, all the same!"

"Not this evening."

"Leon," pleaded Belle, tremulously, "there must be some mistake."

"There is no mistake. Three nights ago you stood between me and one enemy, and to-night I am balked again through your influence."

"But what can you have against a perfect stranger? You have certainly taken him for some one else, Leon."

"Call me a fool, and be done with it!"

"Who do you think it is?"

"It doesn't matter. Why are you so deeply interested in your stranger?"

Belle shrank back, abashed.

"Come, come, Blackwood," expostulated Captain Midnight. "This is a waste of time. You know that something waits to be done to-night."

"Are you going to leave that fellow here?"

"Why not?"

"I thought you didn't keep open house for every one that chose to drop in."

"We have never barred any one out, have we?"

Captain Midnight spoke with a significant laugh.

Belle shuddered as she listened to him.

What was the meaning of the look which he turned upon her face? He had shown no resentment at the charge which Leon had drawn from her. She suspected him the more because he took it all so coolly.

"It is to throw me off my guard," she meditated. "I do not believe that he will allow any one to come to this house and go away again, unless he approves of them. I shall watch him. He may yet lend himself to Leon's hatred."

"Why, oh, why should my brother hate the one man on earth whom I love?"

"Have it your own way!" said Blackwood, in reply to the captain. "But I do not promise to forbear when I meet him on a fair footing."

"Pleasant dreams, Miss Belle!" said the captain, lifting his hat airily to the lady, "and refreshment to your patient. Make him entirely at home here. The place is yours, to dispose of as you please."

"Thank you! The gentleman will put no great tax on your hospitality."

Belle turned toward the house; but the moment she supposed she was free from observation, she returned upon her path, and crept after Captain Midnight and her brother.

She was rewarded by overhearing what filled her with horror.

"Well, of all the specimens of humanity that have come under my notice," said the captain to Leon, "You take the cake!"

"What's the matter now?" growled Blackwood. "Wouldn't it be a good plan to get some other subject than me for your sport? I confess I am getting bored by it!"

"Would you have killed that fellow?" asked the captain, following up his theme without regard to the other's preferences.

"I would have done my best, if there had not been so many meddlers."

"It's too bad—ain't it?—that your friends won't leave you to do a little quiet murdering! But how about your sister? It seems to me that a little consideration for her would not have

been out of place. I don't fancy she would find that agreeable entertainment."

"So much the worse for her!"

"Would you have killed him before her eyes?"

"Why not?"

"Well, as I have had occasion to remark before, you're a tougher fellow than you look."

"Do you know what he is doing here?"

"Sleeping, apparently."

"He is here to put me to sleep! Do you suppose he will politely request her to drop her eyes while he has a shot at me, if she chance to be by when we meet? By your interference, you have given me an even chance for death. That stranger, as she calls him, has followed me a good five hundred miles!"

"Well, I have nothing to do with your battles, provided, as I said before, you fight them at the right time and place. But I have never yet, if I could help it, allowed a lady to be shocked by these little exchanges of civilities which ought to be confined among men. If you want a quiet crack at him, why not arrange it for a time when she need know nothing about it?"

"When? How?"

The fellow will be leaving us in a day or two probably. Then what's the matter with an ambush?"

"Do you mean to say that you will not interfere with me?"

"Only when politeness requires, my dear Blackwood."

"An ambush! I would rather meet him openly. But I confess to you that it would unnerve me to stand face to face with him, and aim a bullet at his heart!"

And in proof of his words Leon shuddered.

"It is not that I fear him. But—but—there would rise an apparition between him and me. I have seen it already."

He covered his face with his hands, as if to shut out some horrifying sight.

"He's been there, in spite of his sister's faith in him," reflected Captain Midnight. "He has the unmistakable ear-marks of a murderer—an amateur at it. Well, those little things won't trouble him so much after he is well broken in!"

And the captain laughed.

But Belle Blackwood was frozen with horror.

Till now she had sincerely believed her brother falsely accused. Now she began a passionate defense of him in her mind. But from that moment the horrid truth grew upon her.

It was proof of her loyal love that she still identified herself with her brother.

"The curse is upon us!" she said. "We must follow it out to the bitter end. Where will it end—oh, where will it end? What does the future hold for us? Are the two men I love most destined to rend my heart between them? Whichever falls by the other's hand, my doom will be the same. And I? What shall I do if either kill the other in my presence? Oh, I dare not think! It is too horrible—too horrible!"

"But it must not be! I will not allow it! Whatever the feud between them, they must make it up, for my sake."

"But first I must get him away without injury. Oh, why was he brought to me like this?"

"The best way is the sure way," continued Captain Midnight. "I confess, Blackwood, with all the maggots in your brain, you are a man to my liking. So I don't want to lose you. Now I'll tell you how we'll fix this fellow, without shocking your sister."

But as they were now nearing the stable, where several men were in waiting for them, it was impossible to follow them further, and Belle lost the captain's plan of assassination.

Resolved that they should reach the man she loved only through her heart, she went back to the house alone.

What would have been her astonishment, however, to know that the subtle captain had been aware of her espionage, and had treated her to a little mare's-nest, quite different from the programme he had really marked out for himself.

The moment he was free of her, his manner changed.

"So much, my dear fellow, for the benefit of your sister, who would make an excellent detective, after a little experience with rogues."

Blackwood turned to him in surprise, exclaiming

"What do you mean?"

CHAPTER XV.

THE CAPTAIN'S PLOT.

"I MEAN," replied Captain Midnight, rubbing his hands with a well-satisfied smile, "that Miss Blackwood has just been shadowing us very cleverly. She would probably have been successful, but that her first bird is an old one."

"Spying upon us, sir? My sister?"

"Don't be tragic, my dear boy! You can't make my hair stand on end."

"But, sir, I would have you know—"

"That the exception proves the rule. I know it already. We are all very virtuous when noth-

ing is at stake; but we all stretch a point when we are vitally interested. There is no use in blinking facts, and the important fact just now is that I have made your sister an innocent accessory to our plot."

"Then I will unmake her! She has nothing to do with it."

"How long will it take you to learn that I always have my own way?"

"Not where my sister is concerned."

"No matter who is concerned. But I am quite as careful of her as you, if you will excuse me for saying so. Her part will reflect no discredit upon her. She has only to help your friend in yonder to escape."

"I do not understand you."

"Of course not. Even less did you a moment ago."

"I am open to enlightenment."

"You paid me the compliment to accept me without question as an assassin."

"I don't know as it is worth while to quibble about names; but if you are sensitive, I am willing to call you—"

"Anything but a blunderer, if you please! If we were to waylay him, don't you suppose your sister would lay his death to our charge, after what has passed?"

"Then you didn't mean it?"

"Certainly not."

"What do you mean? I begin to think that you are too deep for me."

"Suppose he were hanged by a mob from Cony Flat—a mob which Miss Blackwood knows to be hostile to us."

"And a mob, therefore, which is not at all likely to oblige us by hanging a man whom it has nothing against."

"A mob, my dear Blackwood, has something against every man. It only waits to have its grievance pointed out. That is the business of wise men."

"In this case?"

"The fellow in yonder is a horse-thief."

"A horse-thief!"

"And a stage-robber."

"Impossible! I know him. He would not dream of such a thing."

The captain laughed.

"That is the old form of testimony, when a man's opinion of his friends was worth more in a court of justice than it is now. But I will prove to you that he is a horse-thief, nevertheless."

"It will require pretty straight proof to convince me."

"But less to convince a Cony Flat mob, who do not share your high esteem for him," insisted the captain, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I have cause to hate him, but none to malign him."

"You are a very magnanimous enemy. However, he stole yonder horse."

"Pass that. You have a stage-robbery to fasten upon him."

"He will hold up the stage to-night, if the pluck doesn't ooze out of your boots when the pinch comes. I have seen good men cave."

"I am to personate him?"

"You are to ride yonder horse."

"But he will prove an *alibi*. My sister will testify in his behalf."

"You don't know Judge Lynch as well as I do. Her testimony will never be listened to."

"But no one would ride such a horse on such an errand. The thing will be too improbable."

"We'll fix that. We will disguise the horse."

"And so make him fail for the purpose of identification! You are becoming more and more profound!"

"And you are going off half-cocked with even greater facility than usual!"

"I am still open to instruction."

"We will mask the horse in a blanket outfit similar to the one you wear, so arranged that at the proper time he will appear to be accidentally exposed. One glimpse of his flank will be all-sufficient. Any one can swear to him, even by description. What's the matter with that?"

"Matter! I am your debtor for life, if it can be made to succeed!"

And in sudden enthusiasm Blackwood seized Captain Midnight's hand.

"Hanged as a horse-thief! A proved road-agent! I would rather give him that record than kill him with my own hand!"

Then half-aloud he muttered:

"Curse him! dead and covered with infamy, she will be welcome to his body!"

Captain Midnight had very sharp eyes, and without appearing to be curious, he was always on the alert for self-betrayal on the part of Blackwood. Putting this and that together, he had arrived at very nearly the truth.

"If the lady who has caused you so much disturbance should chance to be the one you fear, she herself will be the witness against him," he suggested, watching Blackwood out of the corner of his eye.

But instead of exulting over this prospect, Leon shuddered.

"Let it not be she!" he aspirated, hoarsely.

"I hope she is five hundred miles away."

Captain Midnight gave personal attention to the accoutering of the horse, explaining his

part to Blackwood so that there could be no balk.

Before setting out, he gave careful instructions to his men left behind, with a view to having no miscarriage of his plans in his absence.

As they proceeded to the spot which was to witness the execution of their plot, Blackwood betrayed more and more nervousness.

"This won't do," expostulated Captain Midnight. "Come, come, Blackwood! brace up!"

"Give me some brandy," demanded Leon.

He drank it like water.

"Now!" he declared, "I'm ready to face the devil and all his hordes!"

"A tremendous preparation to face one little woman," laughed Captain Midnight. "See that she don't rout you at a glance."

The spot selected in which to "hold up" the coach was an ideal one for such a purpose in every respect save one, which, however, made it all the better for Captain Midnight's purpose.

It was a wild mountain gorge, with plenty of cover on either side of the road, and with a sharp bend at the lowest point. The descent into it from one direction was so steep as to necessitate caution in the descent, while it would be hopeless to attempt to escape by running the horses up; from the other direction the grade was long and easy.

If the coach had approached from this latter point, nothing better could be asked by the most exacting outlaw. As it was, coming the other way, a bold party might risk a running fight.

"Here, you take your stand in the middle of the road," said Captain Midnight, indicating the desired position. "You cannot be seen till the coach rounds the bend, and is directly upon you. Then here you are in the broad moonlight. You have only to cry *halt!* and go through them in the regulation style. But one thing remember. If there is any resistance, cave! There must be no fight. It won't do to have you wounded. That will spoil everything."

"It will be all the better if it spoils me!" said Blackwood, gloomily.

"We have to risk that," answered Captain Midnight, carelessly. "But the most peaceful and virtuous villager has to run his chances with cyclones and doctors. Meanwhile, the boys and I will lie here in cover, to see that you are not eaten up alive by some old stager. If it isn't necessary for us to show ourselves, we will of course keep dark. But we shall keep an eye on you. See that you acquit yourself creditably. Nothing will give you such a pull with the boys as to take your first dose without a wry face; and nothing will play you out with them so completely as to lose your grip."

After nearly an hour's waiting, Captain Midnight suddenly announced the approach of the coach.

The delay had been of ill-service to Blackwood, who trembled as he sat in position.

"Brace up, old man," was the captain's parting injunction. "You'll be surprised to see how easily the thing is done."

"You think me a coward," said Blackwood. "I have never trembled before a man. I confess I tremble now before a woman!"

This was buncombe, as the captain well knew; but he only said:

"Whatever else happens, don't forget what you are to do. Remember, your revenge depends upon it."

"I shall not forget my revenge!" declared Blackwood, grinding his teeth.

Then the coach could be heard coming down into the gulch; and Captain Midnight sprung to cover where his men were already in hiding.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LITTLE WOMAN FROM 'FRISCO.

The fare at Blaisdell's was nothing to brag of; but Jim's wife was a kind-hearted soul—everybody admitted that.

For herself, Mrs. Blaisdell very pathetically affirmed that "she was willin' to do, ef she had things to do with."

For the past three days she had been "layin' of herself out," as Jim confided to a gaping circle of his cronies.

"Now, what do you 'low as that blame fool has been up to?" he asked the company, evidently by way of introduction to a further confidence.

They all knew Jim well enough to need no assurance that there was neither reprobation nor disrespect in his rather breezy designation of his wife. On the contrary, it was a rough way of expressing the affectionate admiration he really felt for her.

One and all solemnly shook their heads, to indicate that it was impossible to guess in what new direction Mrs. Blaisdell's exemplary virtues had manifested themselves.

"You all seen that thar leetle creeter as showed up t'other day? A mite, by glory, as I could hold in the palm o' my hand!"

And Jim gravely thrust out to view a paw of goodly proportions in all verity; though of course the affirmation it was intended to enforce was a rhetorical flourish, the lady alluded to being far from a midget of dime museum dimensions.

But the boys all examined the hand as if to estimate its capacity, and no one dissented.

One went so far as to remove his pipe, to observe:

"She's little, but, gents, she's—she's *tall!*"

The speaker seemed to have found a word that conveyed an acceptable meaning to his comrades; for one and all assented heartily—some by approving grunts, some by decided nods.

One made the compliment more explicit, by amending:

"Fur looks, Steve!"

To which another added:

"An' chin-music! Oh, swob me!"

Everybody understood this peculiar aspiration as a burst of enthusiasm; and it was plain by their sympathy with it that the lady had made a very favorable impression upon them.

"Chin-music!" repeated Jim. "Waal, I've heared singin', I have! Thar's Sal Belcher—"

"Sal be blowed!" interrupted one of the party, with supreme disparagement. "Don't mention no Sal Belchers in the same day with this hyar. I'd druther hear her say—'I'll thank ye to pass the mullasses,'—than to hyear—waal, the best hand-organ as ever stood on one leg! I would!—blow me ef I wouldn't!"

All accepted this as very high praise indeed; and from the sentiment there was but one excepting voice, and that a mild one.

"Sal, she kin sing 'Hark from the Tombs' amazin'; she kin so!"

The speaker got a withering glance for his trouble. Everybody knew that he was so partial to Miss Belcher as to be disqualified as a critic of her attractions.

One, to whom Sal had given a grudge along with the mitten, "got in" on his rival with:

"Oh, Moses, Abe!—you're color-blind! She howls through her nose; an' when she cuts loose her bazoo, she makes the angels weep!"

"Dry up, you galoots!" admonished one whose interest was in the previous theme. "What's this hyar Jim's a-givin' us?"

"Waal, gents, as I was sayin'," resumed Blaisdell, "thar's Betty, an' thar's the leetle woman from 'Frisco. An' Betty she's a-feedin' of her on the fat o' the land"—accuracy of quotation was never Jim's "best hold"—"a-rakin' an' scrapin' whatever love or money will git in this hyar camp. An' what do ye 'low as Betty she says to me?"

No one pretended to guess, though Jim paused for a reply, looking from face to face with his good-natured affection for his wife in his eyes.

So he proceeded to their enlightenment.

"Betty, she say as how she didn't want to charge her only half price!"

"An' what in Cain do ye want to charge her only half price fur?" says I. "She's lined with money, a heap more'n you or me ever see. Look at her clo'es."

"An' Betty she says:

"That's all right, Jim. But the pore child is so purty, God bless her! An' she's in a heap o' trouble. She ain't used to no sich rough livin' as we worry down us; an' what the Lord has give me, or put whar I kin lay my hands on, that she's welcome to. An' she don't eat no more'n a bird, no time. An' she does me a heap more than I kin do her. I hain't cried so sence leetle Jim died!"

"That's what Betty she says to me. An', gents, it ain't the good what a mite money more or less will do the leetle woman from 'Frisco; but it's the satisfaction Betty 'll git out o' feelin' as she's doin' somethin' fur her. So I says, says I:

"I don't git my livin' out o' none sich as her. It's strappin' galoots as takes their whisky straight what pays the way o' this hyar ranch. So you give her what you like, an' charge her nothin'. An' tell her from me, ef she kin put up with our fare, she's welcome to pay us a visit whenever it's to her notion, an' stay as long as she likes, an' it won't never cost her a red cent."

"Waal," he added, with a sudden drop from the heartiness with which he had spoken, "I didn't set out fur to blow my own horn, an' that's a fact."

One reassured him of the comprehension of his friends, by saying:

"That's all right, Jim. She's a screamin' little woman, an' no mistake. But what's the row with her! Maybe you didn't hyear."

"She's a-lookin' fur some galoot—a runaway husband, or maybe a thunderin' sight worse. I'd like to whale ali Cain out o' him, ef I lay these hyar paws on him once! She says he's a friend what's laborin' under a terrible mistake: an' as how she must find him so's to explain things an' set matters to rights. Blast his ugly pictur! I'd give a leetle somethin' fur the chance to knock the 'friend' out of him!"

The sympathy with this championship was general.

"What fur lookin' chap was this hyar, now?" asked a man who was not of the circle of Jim Blaisdell's immediate friends.

"That I won't purtend to tell ye, stranger," replied Jim. "I hyeared Betty say, too; but I reckon I disremember."

"H'm! What's the lady's name?"

"Fairfax—Viola Fairfax."

"I reckon the feller she's after has got a handle too. But them's mighty easy changed."

"Theo Chalmers, she calls him."

"H'm!"

The stranger proceeded with the lighting of his cigar, with reflective deliberation.

"You hain't run acrost none sich?" asked Jim Blaisdell.

He voiced the interest of the crowd, who were looking at the stranger anxiously.

"Waal, I won't say yes, an' won't say no. Ef I could see the lady herself, I might talk the matter up with her. I don't know what her young man's like yit."

"You kin see her fast enough, I reckon. I'll ask my wife."

Instead of going in quest of Mrs. Blaisdell, Jim shouted at the top of his voice:

"Betty! oh, Betty!"

This unceremonious summons brought to the door leading from the saloon to the other part of the house a very round-faced specimen of the fair sex, not to mention that she was equally rotund in body.

Mrs. Blaisdell had never been a beauty; and just now her eyes and the end of her nose were red with weeping, which was in nowise becoming to her.

Yet the boys all looked at her with a kindness indisposed to criticism.

They were her boys, one and all; and many a good turn had she done them out of the warmth of her heart—a bit of nursing, a trifle of mending, or only a sympathetic ear lent to their troubles.

"What's wantin', Jim?" she asked, with no indication in voice or manner of irritation at having been called from her own vocations.

"Hyar's a gent, Betty, as 'u'd like to see the madam," answered Blaisdell, giving to Miss Fairfax what he thought a suitable title of respect.

"Some o' her folks?" cried Betty, with a burst of hope that irradiated her face.

"I reckon not," said Jim, with a dryness not particularly complimentary to the stranger. "But he may be able to give her a pointer about the gent as she's a-huntin'."

"Dear heart alive!" exclaimed Betty, "she'll be only too glad to see a livin' soul what kin give her a comfortin' word! Come right into the settin'-room, sir; an' I'll have her down in no time."

Jim waved his hand toward the door, by way of seconding his wife's invitation, and the stranger followed Mrs. Blaisdell.

The boys smoked on in silence, each with his eyes fixed intently before him. The only diversion was an occasional flight of a tobacco-juice projectile toward the sawdust-filled spitbox.

All in a flurry which suggested the excitement of a motherly old hen, Betty proceeded up-stairs.

A very sweet voice, with a pathetic wavering uncertainty in its inflections, bade her enter in response to her knock; and she went in to a lady who lay, pale and languid, on her bed.

"Now, don't git nervous, my dear!" she admonished. "Maybe it ain't nothin'. This hyar is a disapp'intin' world—"

"What is it? What is it?" cried the young lady, springing up with the precipitancy of a very excitable nature. "Oh, dear Mrs. Blaisdell, don't keep me waiting!"

"Thar! thar!" said Betty, soothingly. "It's a man as wants to know what sort of a gent it is as you're a-lookin' fur."

"Some one who knows my—to tell me about Mr. Chalmers? He hasn't sent word?"

"Dear heart, how you do take on! He don't 'low as he's seen him fur sure. But I reckoned it 'u'd pay fur you to have a talk with him."

"Oh, certainly! I will go to him at once. It has come—at last! at last! Everything will be set right! Oh, I am so happy!"

And with an ebullition of ecstasy, Viola threw her arms about her hostess's neck.

"Waal! waal! waal!" murmured Betty, with a flood of sympathetic tears. "It does do one's heart good to see a lovin' leetle creeter like you, miss! I hope your young man will show up harsome—I do, on my soul! God bless ye both, says Betty Blaisdell!"

But what was this? Those happy tears suddenly lapsing into a wail of despair, as the girl slipped out of Betty's embrace, and cast herself anew on the bed, sobbing in abject misery.

But the woman, who had seen and soothed so much pain in her humble life of ministry to others, took the quivering little figure in her motherly arms again.

How piteous it was, draped in the black of mourning, in such painful contrast with the golden hair that fell in disheveled elf-locks about the slender shoulders.

A creature made for brightness and gayety, for the caroling of irrepressible gladness, for merry laughter and the arch coyness of happy love.

"What is it, my deary?" murmured the older woman, in a voice that was like balm.

"Oh, my brother! How wicked I am! He is dead! dead! dead! Nothing—nothing in all the world—will ever bring him to life again! And I was nearly laughing, I was so glad!"

"An' ain't you never to laugh again? Ah, my poor birdie! thar's tears an' sobs enough in

the world, an' a many more'n the good Lord kin want of us pore mortals. Ef you was over thar, would you want to look back an' see them as you'd never grudged a smile to before, a-grievin' an' standin' out ag'in' the mite o' happiness what come to 'em now an' ag'in'?"

"Oh, but you don't know. He was killed—oh, so dreadfully killed! Some thought that Theo did it—Oh, I know he is innocent. But so *many* thought so. All of my friends were horrified at me, and cast me off when they knew I was coming to look for him. Do you suppose it is wicked, when I *know*—oh, I *do* know that he could not have harmed any one; least of all, one whose loss would break my heart! He loved me! Oh, I can never tell you—no one can ever know! They were all so hard!"

And with her face hidden in Mrs. Blaisdell's neck, the grief-stricken girl wailed in abject wretchedness.

"An' you stud ag'in' 'em all!" cried Betty, "a leetle tuppence as one wouldn't pit ag'in' a bird! Now, it's sand as I likes to see; fur it's sand as makes the world go round. An' ef you don't win your young man, an' find him all right, too, I'll never bet on a sure thing ag'in! You stand by the faith what the good Lord's give you. It ain't many a man as deserves it; but I've got one as does, an' I know how it is myself. How many do you 'low as it would take to make me believe as my Jim 'u'd do anything ag'in' me?"

And Betty chuckled a happy defiance to all the world.

Perhaps her words were not very logical, nor very much to the point, but they were prompted by a great-hearted sympathy, and they were wonderfully soothing to the feelings of the girl in her arms.

"Now you brace up," she went on, "an' we'll see what this hyar stranger has got to say fur himself."

Viola rallied at once. In her sunny nature the spring of hope would not long be suppressed.

With a timid grace strangely at variance with the courage which had upheld her against all her world, in her solitary quest of her lover, she followed Mrs. Blaisdell down stairs, and into the presence of the man who might show her the goal of her pilgrimage.

CHAPTER XVII.

SIX-SHOT JOHNNY.

"My name," said the stranger, rising and bowing awkwardly, "is Jack Kerby. The boys calls me Six-shot Johnny. I hope I see you well, miss."

He was a man of not more than average size, though to Viola he looked larger, by reason of the style of his accouterment and a certain air with which he carried himself.

Somehow the weapons with which he was armed looked peculiarly formidable, and seemed to be worn conspicuously, though in truth they were not essentially different in size or position from those of other men.

He did not exactly swagger, but his manner was quietly aggressive.

It might be said that he seemed modestly to deprecate being taken for a dangerous man.

Viola set him down as one of those men who, gallant to women, spread havoc about them in their collisions with members of their own sex.

On his side Six-shot Johnny saw the woman whose beauty had stirred him to such enthusiastic description for the questionable entertainment of Mad Blackwood.

A creature so exquisitely dainty that she seemed made to be tenderly cherished for only the gratification of the eye.

Swathed in black of such elegance of fit and fashion as Jack had never before even conceived, her slender little figure seemed too fragile for the touch of a rough paw like his own.

To this somber garb, what a contrast was presented by her delicate, blue-veined hands, her white face, her hair as yellow as ripe wheat!

Jack had never seen such appealing blue eyes, such sensitive, pathetic lips, such an air of immaculate purity as that which invested her.

"She's a woman," Jack had said, "as one would give a heap to have as his—waal, not his sister o' course, but his cousin, or somethin' o' that kind. Blow me ef I wouldn't like to see the gally rooster as 'u'd dast to ask her to marry him!"

Jack thought himself rather "gally" in his association with women; and truth to tell, he had a sufficient degree of assurance under ordinary circumstances.

But, in his own phrase, the eyes of this girl "drove all his sand down into his boots."

"You are very kind," she answered, in accents so sweetly musical, that he wondered whether the women with whom he was familiar could be of the same order of beings. "Won't you please to be seated again?"

Without any apparent want of confidence in him, she yet clung to her hostess's hand, as she sunk, with the unconscious grace of a cultivated lady, upon a settle, and drew Betty down beside her.

"I'm obligeed to you, miss!" stammered Jack, resuming his seat.

"I understand that you can give me intelligence of a gentleman whom I am seeking?"

Her voice seemed to palpitate with the tremulous hope and uncertainty of the question.

"Waal, that jest depends, miss. I don't know as I've got the straight o' your story; but I was 'lowin' as I might 'a' seen a gent what would tally with it."

"His name is Theo Chalmers."

"Waal, you will excuse me, miss; but we don't go much by handles out hyar. Ye see, it's so mighty easy fittin' an old pick with a new helve."

Viola looked a little perplexed by Mr. Kerby's figures of speech, which were evidently new to her.

Mrs. Blaisdell hastened to her assistance.

"They mostly changes their names when they come out hyar," she whispered.

A swift flush mantled Viola's sensitive cheeks.

Was it possible that Theo could be traveling under an *alias*? This, in her eyes, was of itself a badge of infamy.

But when she spoke, her manner underwent a subtle change.

There was a just perceptible erecting of the whole figure, though more especially of the head, and a brightening of the eyes with proud defiance. Her voice rung clearer, too.

It was very quiet, but very effective.

"There is no reason why he should not retain his name," she said, "except his own preference! But I can describe him to you."

And she did, with a particularity which showed how clearly love had stamped his image on her heart.

Six-shot Johnny scratched his head, with a frown of perplexity.

Viola watched him with parted lips, leaning forward in breathless suspense.

"I'd orter locate him, miss, with sich clear specifications," said Jack hesitatingly.

Then he looked up at her, with an expression of mingled doubt and apology in his eyes and voice.

"You will excuse me, miss; but—was it a lifer, or maybe a necktie?"

"I beg your pardon!" murmured Viola, worse perplexed than ever.

"You'd orter talk United States, ef you want a lady to understand you," said Mrs. Blaisdell, with some severity of reproof. "Do you reckon as she's like to be up to your slang?"

"I'm beggin' your pardon, miss!" apologized Jack, with no little chagrin. "Ef it would pay fur the gent to blind his trail—"

"To disguise hisself," explained Mrs. Blaisdell.

"Theo?" ejaculated his sweetheart, quivering with indignation at the suggestion.

"Waal, ye see, miss," observed Six-shot Johnny, with conciliation in voice and manner, "when you air set to shake the sheriff, ye can't always suit yerself."

And with an apologetic smile and inclination of the head, he added, "to take the curse off," as he expressed it:

"I know how it is myself!"

Viola flushed to the roots of her hair, and hung her head in silence.

In disguise! Under an *alias*! She had always associated these with the coarsest kind of villainy. Was it possible that the man she loved had so fallen?

Of course he was innocent; but it was as if he had slept with a murderer.

Tears welled into her eyes, and hung in crystal drops on the long, curved lashes.

"I won't say fur certain," ventured Jack. "But, ef you'll take in Cony Flat, you kin size up the man I've got my eye on," and decide for yourself.

"I will go at once," decided Viola, promptly.

"At once!" cried Mrs. Blaisdell. "In a day or two, my dear. The place fur you jest now, is on your bed."

"Oh, I am stronger than you think. And I have already lost three whole days. I can't afford to risk any more delay."

"Afford! Bless your dear heart, it sha'n't cost you a red cent! Them's Jim's own words."

Viola turned to her hostess with wide-open eyes.

"You misunderstand me," she said. "But, how can your husband have supposed that I would not pay you for my board?"

Mrs. Blaisdell was "knocked groggy," to borrow Six-shot Johnny's expression.

"Oh, he 'lowed as you'd pay fast enough," she stammered. "But, ye see, I've took a notion to ye, ef you will excuse me; an' the same has Jim. An' I reckoned as you might find this work slower'n you figgered on. An' ef so be it would be a sort o' comfort to ye to feel as ye had some sort of a *home*, though the Lord knows as it ain't much—why, then, when you was down-hearted an' ailin', it 'u'd be a consolation to me, an' to Jim, too, to be sure as you was housed whar you would git care sich as we kin give ye. An' Jim, he says, ef you'd take it kindly, an' come to us, you'd be more'n welcome to your keep."

The tears were already streaming down Viola's cheeks, and she put her arms about Betty's neck and kissed her in silence, too much moved with gratitude for the moment to speak.

When she found voice, she asked to see Jim; and he passed in her presence some of the most embarrassed, yet at the same time happiest moments of his life.

"Boys," he said, to his cronies, when they received him back, "she's an angel, an' don't you furgit it!"

Nevertheless, on the coming of the coach she took her departure, in company with Six-shot Johnny—Jack Kerby, the man, be it remembered, whose description of her had, some days before, thrown Mad Blackwood into such a state of excitement.

Going to the coach, she found that she had to pass between a double file of men, who stood hat in hand, bowing respectfully.

"The boys," said Jim, "lowed as they'd like to show you goodwill. An' they've deputed me to say, ef so be the time ever comes when a few good men 'u'd stand you in hand, jest you call on Jim Blaisdell an' his crowd. We'll stand by you ag'in' the world, while wood grows an' water runs!"

And one of the boys, not more impressed by her beauty than the rest, but less prone to the repression of his feelings, added:

"You bet yer sweet life!"

Once more was the girl deeply affected by these testimonials of interest.

"I cannot find words to thank you," she murmured; "but I shall bear you always kindly in remembrance."

And for a moment each held in his own the softest hand he had ever clasped, and felt the power of her humid eyes lifted gratefully to his.

As the coach moved, they gave her three rousing cheers and a "tiger."

The last they saw of her was the waving of a dainty lace handkerchief from the coach window, as it disappeared around the bend.

Meanwhile, Six-shot Johnny—who had been not a little puffed up by the privilege he was enjoying, to the open envy of the crowd—addressed himself to her entertainment.

Now, to a man of the Jack Kerby type, social intercourse consists chiefly in "blowing his own bazoo."

When pitted against liars of his own sex, Jack's adventurous life lost nothing by having him as its chronicler. Under the inspiration of Viola Fairfax's trusting eyes, he outdid even himself.

If you would believe him—and she did—the population of the West had been measurably retarded by the ravages of his implacable bowie and invincible revolvers.

It was curious to note that Miss Fairfax, who would have pleaded piteously with a ruthless boy about to pull off the wings of a fly, was not at all shocked by Jack's bloodthirsty career.

Of course her complacency arose from the conviction that Jack's weapons had always been wielded in the cause of virtue, and that Western society was considerably purer by reason of his having devoted himself so disinterestedly to weeding out objectionable characters.

She was a little doubtful as to such summary disposal of poor Lo; but Jack assured her that "the only good Injun was a dead Injun."

When it came to the banishment of gamblers who preyed upon the hard earnings of "the honest miner," to the meting out to road-agents their just meed of lead instead of gold, and especially to the protection of innocence and beauty from the persecutions of villainy, she was sure that the narrator was a hero whose farce, were justice done, would not so long have remained unsung.

Jack told it all very modestly, so as to give his hearer the impression that his deeds occupied so large a share in the history of the country, that it was impossible to present a fair picture of mountain life without drawing principally upon his biography for illustrations.

Viola could not fail to be impressed by the number of women Jack had been privileged to rescue from heartrending calamities of all sorts; and she wondered mildly at his having come unscathed through the fascinations with which, through the grateful admiration of these damsels, his pathway must have been beset. For Jack frankly admitted that he was still a bachelor.

That her own progress through this wild country had thus far been attended with no appearance of danger, but on the contrary with the utmost consideration and respect, rough yet kindly, had not surprised her till now. And now she had the ready explanation that it was no doubt due to this modern Don Quixote having purged the country of outlawry, for which she was duly grateful.

She had time to reflect on this, and found confirmation in the popular maxim that a brave man is kind to brutes, when Jack got out of the coach at the foot of a long grade, to stretch his legs, as he said, and relieve the horses of the weight of his "carrass."

She might have formed a somewhat less complimentary estimate of Jack's disinterested generosity, if she had known that, loitering far enough behind the coach to be out of sight and hearing, he encountered without surprise a man evidently known to him.

"O. K.?" was his greeting; which seemed to

indicate that this meeting was indeed premeditated.

"A new wrinkle," answered the man.

"I hope Cap has sent me detailed instructions, then. He was mighty partic'lar in settin' the pins up."

"I've got it down to a hair."

"Then give it to us, Joe; an' give it to us slow."

A prolonged conference followed, in which Six-shot Johnny was not sparing of questions.

"All right," he said, at last. "I'll put her through fur all she's worth. It's plain sailin' ef I find the string. I reckon thar won't be no dependence to be put on that addle-noodle. He's as crazy as a chinch-bug on a red-hot griddle all the while; an' I reckon he'll lose his head whether it's the woman he thinks it is, or not."

At the top of the incline he found the horses breathing, and resumed his place in the coach.

The conversation now turned upon the locality they were traversing.

"Thar's jest one nest o' scallawags in this hyer section," continued Six-shot Johnny, "what's achin' fur to have some good man mop up the ground with 'em; an' ef they don't git it before long, it won't be fur want o' somebody what's willin' to take the job!"

He did not indicate this would-be regulator more particularly; but the inference was an easy one, and Miss Fairfax's eyes showed that she made it without prompting.

"Gamblers?" she asked, "or horse-thieves?"

"Road-agents!" corrected Six-shot Johnny, impressively.

"Road-agents!" echoed Viola, with a start of apprehension. "Stage robbers?"

"Oh, you needn't be afeard, miss," was the reassurance of her escort. "These gents keeps posted. They don't go fur no coach without knowin' what they're likely to find inside of it."

And Six-shot Johnny smiled, in cool confidence that due weight would have been given to the fact of his presence.

"But are there road-agents on this route?" quavered Miss Fairfax, nevertheless.

"Waal, they show up now an' ag'in, when they think they see a walk-over. A tenderfoot, ye understand, ain't no account in a scrimmage with road agints. A coachful of 'em will cave at the word o' command. So the boys don't mind how many thar is of them."

In referring to the outlaws as "the boys," Jack was guilty of a little slip of the tongue; but of course his auditor was not familiar enough with the subtler shades of meaning of his peculiar dialect to notice it.

"But why don't the police arrest them?" urged Viola, with pallid and tremulous lips.

Jack lifted his eyebrows and shoulders in a faint shrug.

"Police! In this hyar country, miss, every man is his own policeman."

"Then why could not a few brave and experienced men secrete themselves in the coach, and surprise them?"

"Nothin' would be easier, ef the road-agents didn't spot the coach."

"I beg your pardon."

"Excuse me, miss! What I wanted to say was, you couldn't put up such a job as that without the road-agents gittin' on to it. Then they would call another time."

"Do you mean that they have spies to watch the coaches?"

"That's the size of it, miss. Ef you want good work done in this hyar line, let one man go in fur what he's worth. That's the reason I've happened along myself."

"Oh, but one man against a number, all armed and desperate!"

Jack smiled in quiet self-confidence.

"I reckon I wasn't called Six-shot Johnny fur nothin', miss. As fur weapons, the road-agents don't carry 'em all."

And by way of illustration, he drew his revolvers from their holsters, and laid them one on either knee, adding to the array a bowie with a ten-inch blade which he drew from the back of his neck.

This warlike demonstration left Viola breathless.

"Oh, I have no doubt of your courage or skill," she declared. "But the darkness must give them an advantage."

"But not the broad moonlight of to-night, if thar was any danger this trip."

But in spite of his assurances, he made an ostentatious examination of his weapons, as if to be in readiness for any emergency.

Viola felt that she must know the worst.

"Have they made any descent upon the coach recently?" she asked.

"Waal, to be squar', they're at it off an' on most o' the time."

"And has there been no attempt to suppress them? They must have some place of resort."

"Waal, miss, it's easy enough sometimes to locate a flea; but it's a hoss of another color to git yer finger on him. Thar may be some growlin' on the quiet. But when the chief be walks the town, you don't git no peep out o' nobody. An' you bet glowerin' don't break no bones."

"Do you mean to say that the man is actually

known, and allowed to walk unmolested in the streets of your towns?"

"It's one thing to suspicion a man, ye understand, an' another to call the cards up his sleeve."

"Who is the suspected man?"

"Waal, the boys looks mighty glum when Captain Midnight is around; but nobody don't say nothin'."

"Captain Midnight!"

The very name had a fascination about it.

"Suppose," panted Viola, her eyes distending with the thought, "that we are attacked to-night?"

"Waal, I reckon you'd hyear from yours truly, Six-shot Johnny!"

As if in answer to his defiance came the challenge:

"Pull up thar, you rooster! Stand in your place! Up with your hands!"

The voice was curiously hoarse and muffled, plainly for the purpose of disguise. It was loud, either with the aggressiveness of a brutal nature, or the blustering of a bully, or of one not quite self-assured.

"Don't shoot, boss!" responded the stage-driver. "I pass!"

And the horses were reined sharply in.

With a cry of alarm Viola shrunk to the side of her promised protector, clutching his arm convulsively.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SUCCESSFUL COMEDY.

A SOLDIER will tell you that on first going into battle he would very much rather not; but, once in and at it, a fierce exaltation drowns the voice of cowardice.

Similarly, road-agenting is ticklish business, at the outset.

With a feeling as if his heart were in his mouth along with the pebbles whose office was to disguise his voice, Mad Blackwood made his first demand.

Rage came to the support of his wavering courage; and instead of being cool and determined, as the voice of the ideal highway robber is, his was essentially the voice of a tenderfoot in the art.

But the readiness with which his challenge was submitted to, caused a change of feeling that was a surprise to himself.

Success brought a wild thrill of exultation. He was master of the situation. He had but to command.

The eagerness to exercise this new-found sway, to see others cringing before his will, was an ecstatic intoxication.

Possessed by it, he for the moment forgot the apprehensions that had haunted him.

Thus far it had seemed a fatality that the woman he dreaded to meet must have been brought hither to confront him. But now this fear vanished from his mind, like a ghost into thin air.

Urging his horse forward to the side of the arrested coach, he shouted, now with no wavering in his voice, nor yet the anger of resentful fear, but the clear ring of confident command:

"Come out o' hyar, gents; an' don't fool away no time thinkin' about it!"

At the first challenge, Viola Fairfax had been thrilled with horror at the thought that she was about to witness a fearful carnage.

Six shot Johnny had just announced that he had come here in the hope of meeting these outlaws; and now they were upon him.

She had no doubt that he would at once proceed to their extermination, as he had done in those desperate encounters of which he had given such graphic accounts.

Now, Viola had a woman's horror of bloodshed in the actual process thereof, though it produced such delightfully thrilling effects in the hero portraiture of an artist in words.

Her first impulse, then, was to expostulate with the vindicator of law and order at her elbow, and adjure him to spare her feelings, and give the outlaws one more chance for repentance and amendment, by first trying the efficacy of moral suasion, re-enforced, if need were, with a wholesome display of his warlike resources if driven to extremity, but without actual violence save as a last resort.

"Oh, Mr. Kerby! Pray, pray wait a moment! You may be able to frighten them. Tell them who you are, and that you are prepared for them. But do not—do not let me actually see any one killed, if it can be avoided!"

"Waal, I sw'ar!" ejaculated Six-shot Johnny, within the secret chamber of his admiring soul. "When anybody else would be shrinkin' an' shriekin' fur number one, willin' to sell out the hull world if only her own sweet hide wasn't perforated!"

But aloud he said, with reassuring collectedness:

"Don't take on, miss. I'll see what kin be did."

And he thrust his head out of the window; while breathless with suspense, her heart swelling with admiration of him as the greatest hero surely in all the mountain country, Viola waited the issue.

He drew back his head, and said, with no tremor of fear in his voice:

"It's Cap Midnight hisself; an' he's a bad 'un, ef thar ever was one."

"Oh, what is to be done?" quavered Viola.

"He'll fight as long as his skin will hold an ounce o' blood," declared Six-shot Johnny, still with no apparent disturbance at the desperate character of his antagonist. "He's noted fur it. An' ef so be I should wipe him out in the end, he'd riddle this coach first so's you'd could use it fur a muskeeter net."

"Oh!" gasped Viola, now with some natural personal apprehension.

"Bein's as a lady ain't built fur no sich resk," pursued Mr. Kerby, "I reckon the proper thing to do is to pass this hand, an' lay fur him ag'in."

And in token of his pacific intentions, he re-committed his weapons to their respective holsters.

"Oh, by all means!" cried Viola, her voice vibrant with relief and gratitude.

What a sacrifice it must be for this giant of prowess to curb his manhood and allow himself to be bearded by an insolent foe, and all from motives of chivalrous consideration for her sex!

"It will not reflect on you, dear Mr. Kerby," she assured him. "He will understand. But, oh, how I wish I were a man, instead of the miserable coward that I am, so that I should have the courage to join with you, and fight it out to the bitter end!"

But in spite of her brave aspirations, she clung to him trembling.

Not that she feared indignity. In the whirl of excitement she did not forget that, according to all the accounts she had ever read, robbers were invariably polite to ladies, lifting their hats to them, and making them speeches of formal compliment—giving them the title of "lady," though that form of address is a hundred years out of date, except with the costermongers of some eastern cities.

Nevertheless it was thrilling to be for the first time in the power of a red-handed road-agent!

The roughness of his command to evacuate the coach was a little unexpected; but she argued that as yet he was unaware of her presence.

"Hold on, Cap," said Six-shot Johnny. "You needn't jump on us. We've got a lady in hyar."

Mad Blackwood started, and his veins ran ice.

"Fetch her out!" he commanded, with more harshness than even he was aware.

The coward in him brought the brute to the fore.

Viola in her turn started. Was she to be exposed to rudeness? Surely her protector would not permit this.

It must be confessed that with her warm emotions in other directions went something of a temper; and she felt strong in the support of a man who had proved such a terror to evildoers.

What was one road-agent, even with the record of Captain Midnight, against the illustrious Six-shot Johnny, who had won his sobriquet by leaping single-handed into the midst of six desperadoes, and making each shot tell, to their utter rout and last reckoning of three of their number?

"Keep yer heart up, leetle woman!" he said, to reassure her. "This hyar rooster don't eat his meat raw."

He got out of the coach, and turned to hand her to the ground.

She took his hand, and to prove her confidence in him, prepared a decidedly defiant face for the inspection of the road-agent.

Her eyes first sought the step to make sure of her footing; but as she emerged from the coach upon it, she lifted them, to receive an unexpected shock.

Before her sat a man enveloped in a blanket, so fashioned that it rested over his head like a pillow-slip, the corners standing out at the sides, and holes providing for sight and hearing.

Equally shapeless was the draping over his whole body, so that it would be impossible to identify him from his present appearance.

The horse was similarly disguised, even his legs being swathed. His body had a covering like the barb or housing of the steed of a twelfth-century knight.

The unknown—that which cannot be estimated by familiar tests—has always inspired fear; and since men first began to war against one another, they have made themselves more terrible by disguising the figure, and hiding the expression of the face with mask or pigments.

To Viola this weird figure was more startling than her most fearful conception of humanity, even a known cannibal, would have been.

But she in turn excited a terror as unaccountable as unexpected.

At sight of her face, clearly revealed by the moonlight, Mad Blackwood sat a moment as if paralyzed. Then with a yell of dismay that caused him to extrude the pebbles from his mouth, he dug his spurs into his horse's flanks, and sought to rein him short round for flight.

This was the moment for which Six-shot Johnny had been prepared; and abandoning

Viola on the step of the coach, he made a bound for the head of Blackwood's horse.

It appeared that his aim was to seize the bridle-rein, and this he did with his left hand; but his right hand sought the end of a rope which, coming through an opening in the housing at the neck, dangled before the horse's breast.

Captain Midnight had trusted more to the address of Six-shot Johnny than to the presence of mind of Mad Blackwood.

A vigorous pull at this rope-end would bare the hind-quarters of his horse, and so expose his conspicuous marking, to be used in fixing the identity of his rider.

But Mad Blackwood was not driven so far beside himself as to be impervious to impressions.

This leap of Six-foot Johnny's was a part of the arrangement in which he had been instructed, and it affected him like the cue in a drama.

Mechanically he carried out his part, swinging himself from the saddle as if to escape from the seizer of his horse, but really with the purpose of himself exposing his horse, by catching his spur in the housing and dragging it over the animal's rump.

All this would appear quite natural and entirely accidental, even if there had been a far more critical witness than a frightened girl.

The desired effect was produced as cleverly as if Mad Blackwood had been entirely self-possessed; but in his precipitation the entanglement of his spur in the blanket-covering of his horse tripped him, so that he fell.

As Six-shot Johnny released the horse, the frightened beast scoured away down the road in the direction whence the coach had come.

"Swipe me!" shouted the seemingly astonished Jack. "It's Thad Burchard! See! see! Look at the boss! Would know him among a thousand!"

And with pointing finger he directed Viola's attention to the telltale hind-quarters!

This momentary distraction gave Mad Blackwood time to scramble to his feet, so that when Six-shot Johnny made a dash at him, seemingly with the purpose of effecting his capture, he was ready to spring away into the covert at the side of the road, and become lost to sight in the black shadows.

Six-shot Johnny promptly drew a revolver and fired after the retreating figure.

But, as if without confidence in the effectiveness of the shot, he sprung to the coach, shouting to Viola, who stood paralyzed with excitement on the step:

"Into the coach, miss! He'll come back at us in a twist o' yer wrist!"

And to the driver:

"Crack up, blast ye! Be yer goin' to sleep? Lay out over them bosses! I'll put a hole through you if the lady's hurt!"

And seizing the helpless girl, he lifted her bodily, and bore her backward into the coach before him.

"Down on the floor, miss!" he shouted, forcing her down between the seats, so that his command was in reality only an explanation. "That's the only safe place now."

He himself turned to the door with ready revolver.

The return shots came as soon as he had predicted, not from Mad Blackwood, indeed, who had completely lost his head, but from Captain Midnight.

While the coach coursed away at a mad gallop, Six-shot Johnny returned the fire, as if using the flashes of his enemy's pistol to direct his own shots.

This sham battle imposed equally upon Viola and the stage-driver.

It was soon over, the road-agent apparently not thinking it worth while to follow the fleeing coach.

"I hope you will excuse me, miss," said Six-shot Johnny, raising Viola from her uncomfortable position, and placing her almost dead with fright on the seat. "In these hyar leetle bushes one has to act quick; and I reckon it was better to save yer skin an' rumple yer dress."

"Oh, I owe you everything!" panted deluded Viola. "How can I express my appreciation of your courage and address. I hope you are not hurt."

"By Thad Burchard?" cried Six-shot Johnny, in laughing scorn. "Waal, I reckon not! Ef I had 'a' knowed it was him, I'd 'a' gobbled him like a June bug off a sweet pertater vine! Did you spot his hoss? Thar ain't no two like that in this section. He's a fool to come out in such a rig. He had him fixed off mighty good, though, ef his spur hadn't caught in the blanket. I've got him whar the wool's short; an' I'll make Cony Flat too hot to hold him! But I reckon he'll know enough not to show his nose in that camp ag'in fur a spell."

"I 'lowed, first-off, as it was Cap'n Midnight; an' I reckoned, even if he didn't have a power o' backin', he'd fight like a catamount before he caved, the which it was takin' too much resk fur you, miss. But ef I'd 'a' knowed as it was that blatherskite, I'd 'a' jumped out an' ordered him off his hoss, an' 'a' kicked him clean down the road."

Viola was breathless and faint. Now that the excitement was over, she sat trembling and sobbing hysterically.

"Hello, pardner!" shouted Six-shot Johnny to the driver, "did you git on to Thad Burchard's mustang?"

"You bet!" came the reply.

"We've got him down fine."

"I reckon."

"Blame fool."

"He is so."

With this point satisfactorily made, Jack returned to the restoration of Miss Fairfax's equanimity.

The coach reached Cony Flat without further disturbing incident, where, in spite of her prostration, Viola would have endeavored to secure immediate communication with the man whom Jack had thought might answer her quest, but that Jack, engrossed in the vindication of the outraged law, left her at the door of the Crystal Palace.

This hope abandoned for the night, she was glad to seek her couch; and once down, it seemed as if she had not the strength left to lift a finger.

At last, in spite of the excitement of perhaps breathing the same air with the man who was her all-in-all, the sleep of utter exhaustion soothed all her anxieties in oblivion.

What would the morrow bring forth?

CHAPTER XIX.

BAFFLED.

"AFTER him! after him!" shouted Captain Midnight. "He has gone clean mad!"

"He's skeert out of his boots!" growled one of the outlaws.

And in no gentle mood he added the usual objurgation "for such cases made and provided."

Blackwood was indeed scouring away like a madman, heedless of bruising rock and tearing brier.

"Let him rip," was the seconding of another disguised robber. "We hain't no use fur sich a beggarly coward."

"After him, I say!" commanded Captain Midnight, in a voice that no one cared to disregard. "It is what *I* want, not what *you* want!"

And those who wished to curry favor with their leader set out in pursuit of the fleeing Blackwood as fast as the darkness and obstructions of the way would permit.

The remorse-haunted man was indeed nearly beside himself with horror. If the ghost of his victim had arisen in his path, he could not have been more overcome than at the sight of Viola's face clearly outlined in the full flood of moonlight.

Pale with grief, her face had looked ghastly in that light, and the expression of proud defiance had seemed to him like the reproach of a Nemesis.

Her coming, coupled with what had led up to the meeting, seemed to him a fatality.

"It is my doom!" went thundering through his brain. "The hangman, death, and hell follow after! I shall see him again! Oh, the horror of it!"

And as if the bloodless face of his victim was ever peering over his shoulder, he fled headlong, he neither knew nor cared whither.

As he fled, his surroundings added to his fear. On every side were grotesque figures of crag and brushwood, made weird by the sharp alternation of moonlight and black shadow. At every step they seemed to clutch at him, or to obstruct his path.

And another terror was added—the hue and cry of the pursuing outlaws.

In a moment of self-possession he would have known that they were his friends—that is to say, in the careless sense in which we use that designation.

But now he realized only that they were pursuers; and his distraught imagination invested them with the hideous guise of demons.

Thus goaded, he promised to give his pursuers a doubtful chase; but there were men at his heels who knew that, never overlooking a dereliction, Captain Midnight was equally mindful of faithful service; and, though lost sight of again and again, they stuck to him like bloodhounds, till with a sudden shock he fell headlong and lay unconscious.

"He's my meat!" shouted the first who laid his hand upon him.

Then, as the others came up one by one, they stood round panting, with no interruption for some time, save for the relief of an oath.

"Blast him! we'd orter give him a good lammín' before we take him in!" declared one, who had a painful reminder of the occasion on his shin.

"That's with my compliments, anyway!"

And the speaker gave the inert body a vicious kick.

But the proposer of this sort of revenge had not the nerve to second this quick acceptance of his suggestion. He had enemies; and some of them might "peach" to the captain.

A like faint-heartedness deterred others who bore Blackwood no personal good-will.

"Come, boys," said he who had first closed in upon the quarry, "thar ain't no use standin' hyar waitin' fur somethin' to turn up. The galoot can't walk hisself, that's plain; so we've got to carry him."

"There was not a little grumbling; but, as the proposer reminded them, they all knew that Captain Midnight would "stand no foolishness."

On the way back somebody stumbled, and the body was dropped once—by accident.

Meanwhile, the stage having passed out of sight and hearing, a rider was sent down the road in pursuit of the runaway horse.

Captain Midnight was in delight.

"Everything has worked to a charm!" he declared. "Now for home. To-morrow Cony Flat will do me a service."

And he laughed as if he had a good joke all to himself.

Without betraying any particular concern at Mad Blackwood's insensible condition, he saw that he had suitable care at once.

"Well, old man," he said, on the reappearance of animation, "you've come out of this thing all right, after all. Brace up, partner. Everything is lovely, and—"

But Mad Blackwood started up wildly.

"Hah!" he panted, staring about as if in expectation of some dreaded apparition. "Where are they?"

"Hold on, partner!—hold on!" admonished Captain Midnight, quietly pressing him back, and holding his wrists firmly. "The thing is all over with in a way that leaves nothing to be desired; and no harm has come, or is likely to come, to anybody."

"I saw her! She has come for me! I knew it was she! And he too, with his wounds all gaping and running blood! Oh, my God! Oh! oh! oh!"

The end was a wail of horror. The broken man wept and sobbed without restraint.

The men had glowered at him in disgust at his cowardice; but they now took something of the infection of his despair, as if the burden on his conscience was something more than ordinary murder.

More than one of their number had killed his man, with no great poignancy of remorse at the time, because it was a thing lightly passed over by the community from which they derived their standards. But now they saw it with something of the eyes of a man who had been molded by a different public sentiment; and ugly visions flitted before their fancies.

Captain Midnight alone seemed invulnerable to this influence.

"Come! come!" he expostulated, "this won't do! Suppose it is the woman you're on the lookout for? She don't bring any dead men with her, you may be sure; and we're not afraid of living ones."

"How's that, boys?" appealing to his men. "What do we say to the sheriff?"

"How d'ye do? an' good-by!"

The men brightened at once. Some of them laughed. It was always so. Whatever was wrong with them, a word from the captain never failed to set them right.

This is the subtle power that makes the natural chieftain.

Mad Blackwood for the first time seemed to recognize his voice.

"Is that you, Midnight?" he cried, clinging to him, and peering eagerly into his face.

"You bet, partner! Come! come! good cheer!"

"Oh, Cap! You will stand by me! You know you said you would! King is a devil; and he will fetch a posse with him that is afraid of nothing."

"The more the merrier! Eh, boys?"

The outlaws set up a cheer, so infectious did they find their leader's exhilaration.

Mad Blackwood was not easy to reassure. He appealed to them all with spaniel-like supplication.

"Don't go back on me, boys! If ever I have it in my power to remember you more substantially, you may depend that I will not forget my indebtedness to you."

Under the eye of their chief, some of them reassured him with the required promise; but the man who had displayed the pluck to vent his dislike with an honest kick, now said boldly:

"Ef you had a mite more o' sand, you wouldn't need so much backin'; an' we'd all do the squar' thing with a deal better good-will."

"That's so, Tom," agreed Captain Midnight, who had the good sense not to let a man see that he had taken a liberty, unless it was such a one as demanded prompt and exemplary punishment. When it did, he was equally ready.

The result was, that his men never felt that he was a petty tyrant. At the same time they knew that he would allow no man to walk over him.

So now Mad Blackwood was "double-shotted" with whisky, and the whole party set out for the "ranch."

Meanwhile, during their absence, Belle Blackwood had passed through a painful ordeal.

Believing that, his own villainy apart, Captain Midnight was willing to sacrifice Spot the Sparkler to her brother's hatred, the girl had

thought to frustrate them by effecting 'Spot's escape before their return.

Leaving him still, as she supposed, asleep, she went out to reconnoiter, only to find several of the men playing cards in the stable, so that all chance of securing a horse was for the time being cut off.

"It is hopeless, in his condition, to get him away on foot," she reflected. "I can defend him better in the house than I could without shelter. Only, if I wait for his returning strength, the ambush will have been set."

This thought made her desperate. There would be no time like the present, when his enemies believed that no precaution was yet necessary.

She finally concluded to risk his weakness, but was deterred from this by the discovery that the gamblers in the stable were not the only ones to be evaded.

Returning to the house, she abruptly ran upon some one who was standing perfectly still in a spot of dense shadow, evidently with the purpose of letting her go by without discovering him.

"Who's there?" she demanded, her heart in her mouth.

Instead of replying, the man set out to run away, and so preserve his *incognito*.

"Halt!" she cried, peremptorily. "Halt, or I fire!"

The fugitive stopped as if shot.

"Don't shoot, miss!" he pleaded. "I ain't doin' no harm."

"Who are you?" she insisted, still holding the shadowy figure under cover of her weapon.

"It's only me, miss—Toby Sutleff."

"What are you doing, skulking about secretly?"

She had the wit to put a bold face on the matter, so as to be able to render a plausible showing as to her own movements.

"I hope you won't give me away, miss," pleaded the fellow, humbly. "The Cap has had me in the calaboose all day on bread an' water, an' mighty slim pickin's o' bread at that; an' I got a chance to git out, an' lowed as I'd forage about a bit fur a scrap o' meat out o' the pantry, ef I could git it. Ef you'll keep it dark, miss, I'll do you a good turn any time I see the chance."

This was a very clever lie, all things considered. It accounted not only for his secrecy, but for his presence in that particular locality, which was in close proximity to the ranch kitchen.

The girl started. Here was a phase of Captain Midnight's discipline altogether unknown to her. Had he such an ascendancy over his men that they would submit to imprisonment?

But another thought flashed through her mind. Was it possible to make an ally of this delinquent? He was strong. He might be able to carry Spot on his back. Cony Flat once reached, the man she loved would be safe.

But an instinctive sense of the utter untrustworthiness of such a villain deterred her from making overtures to him.

"He would betray me to the captain, trusting to that service outweighing the offense of breaking from confinement."

So she said—

"I am not Captain Midnight's jailer; nor am I a tale-bearer."

"It's mighty good of you, miss. An' I hope you won't think as I reckoned you'd give a pore cove away, only as you might 'low it was your duty."

Belle turned away, as if with no further interest in the matter, and then affected to hesitate.

"If you—I should like—I want to see whether my brother is with the men, or not. But they are drinking and singing in such a way that I do not care to expose myself to their brutality. Could you, without betraying yourself, ascertain for me whether he is at the stable? I would take that as a kindness."

The girl blushed in the darkness at this equivocation; but she felt that all would be lost by the appearance of anything suspicious in her movements.

"I'll try, miss—I will so!" declared Toby, with an air of satisfaction at this chance to show his gratitude for her forbearance.

"Don't run any risk to yourself," she urged. "And don't keep me waiting long. Let the matter go, if you meet with any difficulty."

"I'll find out, miss, ef it's in the power o' man."

And Toby went away secretly chuckling.

"She's tryin' to pull the wool over my eyes, is she? I wonder ef she swallowed my yarn? She's a deep one, ef she's only playin' back at me. She reeled it off as natural as life."

Instead of going to the stable, he crept away till he was sure he was out of the girl's sight, and then returned to watch her, resolved that she should not send him on a fool's errand, and then steal a march on him.

He found that his suspicions of this kind of a trick were groundless. Belle paced back and forth restlessly, awaiting his return.

Of course he understood that this was a sham, only the carrying out of the role she had assumed. So, having waited a sufficient time to make it appear that he had executed her behest, he presented himself with the report that Blackwood was not there.

She thanked him briefly, and returned directly to her cabin.

"Am I under surveillance?" she asked herself.

"Is that fellow a sly rogue?"

She resolved to pit her wits against his, if he was indeed a spy.

"One thing I must settle. If Captain Midnight has set a watch on me, it will be fatal to try to elude him at the very outset of his task. And I must know it, to prevent blundering in the future."

An hour passed in strained listening discovered no sound, save the voices of the men in the stable.

Then she ran the risk of slipping out of doors, resolved to know the worst, even at the expense, if need were, of self-betrayal.

She discovered no one; but before long she started at the hoot of an owl, as she supposed.

Toby Sutleff ever afterward boasted of his imitative and ventriloquial powers. He was within thirty feet of her at the moment of his successful experiment.

Its effect was not long delayed.

The door of the stable opened, to give exit to one of the roisterers.

He stood in the doorway, looking out, as if he had only come out to relieve the tedium of their waiting.

"I say, Jeff!" he called back to one of his companions, without looking round, "it's as light as day out, but fur the trees."

"Oh, hang the light, an' the trees, too! Come back hyar an' put up your leetle divvy."

"I've had my fill o' that thar. I wonder when Cap'll be back."

"Say, Gabe! come in!"

"Not much! I'll tell ye what, fellers! What's the matter with a game o' quoits? You could pick up a pin anywhar in the open. Come out, the lot o' ye, an' stretch yer legs."

"Legs be blowed! Sling 'em around, Jeff. Ef that wall-eyed galoot wants to go prowlin' around in the dark, let him. I'm puttin' up a fifty-cent blind, I be. Show us the color o' yer money."

"I kin knock the socks off o' the best man in the crowd!" still urged Gabe. "You don't dast to pitch ag'in' me, none o' ye, fur rocks! Whar's Sammy Sanders's sand? He's had a cave-in sense last hyear from! I'm a-waitin' fur somebody to jump on me! I never see nary hoss-shoe what I couldn't ring the spike with! When they strikes, I nails 'em to the ground! Come fur me, gents! I lays out my friends, an' buries my enemies!"

Gabe's challenge was suggestive of the chant of a savage.

He did not miscalculate the effect of this crowing.

"Why, blast your ugly pictur'!" came a new voice, "you can't pitch fur sour apples, you can't!"

"I ain't so good on wind as some folks, oh, no!" insinuated Gabe.

An oath came from the stable, followed by an equally profane expostulation.

"Hold on, Sandy! You don't want nothin' o' that blatherskite. Set down, man! set down!"

"I kin lay Gabe Grease-back out the best day he ever see—or night, either! An' I'm goin' to do it!"

Sammy Sanders did not render Gabe's name accurately. It was a German one which had been thus Anglicized for greater ease of pronunciation.

He made his appearance in a very defiant frame of mind; and while the gambler within cursed both him and Gabe roundly, Gabe set out for the quoit ground laughing in triumph.

Another came out to see the game; and, once out, he proved to be as desirous of stretching his legs as Gabe had professed to be.

He roamed about so restlessly, that Belle had difficulty in getting back into the house unnoticed, in despair of being able to pilot Spot the Sparkler to safety.

Toby Sutleff chuckled as he witnessed her retreat.

In despair she crept into the room where Spot lay. He still seemed to sleep soundly.

So it happened that she did not know when a horse was quietly brought to the ranch, and put into the stable.

It was the mustang whose particolored hide was to be made the instrument of villainy.

Shortly after a cavalcade rode up without precaution of any kind.

Belle now went out of her cabin with equal boldness, to be shocked by the appearance of her brother.

At sight of him she for the moment forgot that other who had so engrossed her thoughts and feelings.

"Oh, Leon!" she cried, receiving him in her arms, as he slipped from the saddle scarcely able to stand. "What has happened? You are hurt? Oh, heavens! it is blood! He is wounded! Help! help! he is dying! Oh, Leon! Leon! Leon!"

His head was swimming. His nerves were entirely unstrung. He fairly whimpered.

Belle was terrified beyond expression. She believed that he had received a mortal wound in some sort of a conflict. That it was a shameful one, her sinking heart misgave her.

She was about to lose him. She could not even cherish his memory without a blush!

Captain Midnight sprung to her assistance, though she sunk from him as the cause of this, her bitterest trial.

"You are mistaken," he said, gently. "The trouble is with his mind, not with his body."

"Can his mind have done this? Look! look! Oh, I shall never forgive you!"

And she fell to sobbing piteously.

"He has had a fall, but one not necessarily serious. A glance will show you that the blood is entirely from an abrasion of the skin, not from a bullet wound, as you seem to surmise. He may be a little faint and dizzy now; but a night's rest will remedy all that. Your services as nurse will prove no very severe tax, if your other patient does not stand much more in need of your care."

This was a very clever allusion. It divided her anxiety, and, more quickly than anything else could have done, allayed her fears for her brother.

"Let us get him into the house," she said.

And between them he was borne in and laid on his bed.

"Now, if you will follow my advice," said the captain, taking her aside, "you will administer an anodyne to your brother. The chief trouble, as I told you before, is not of the body, but of the mind."

"I have nothing to give him."

"I will let you have some morphia."

The word sent a new thought flashing through Belle's mind.

Unable to look the captain in the eye with the purpose that formed like lightning in her heart, she turned away, as if to busy herself with Leon's comfort, as she said:

"You are very kind. Both you and the men must be cold and tired. I will make enough for all, while I am making coffee for Leon."

"Oh, we cannot think of putting you to so much trouble," protested the captain. "The cook can make coffee for the men, if they want it. But I would thank you for a cup. That will involve no extra labor. And the men will feel indebted to you, just the same."

"It will be no trouble," insisted Belle, "and they have been kind enough to express a preference for the coffee I have made for them before."

"With good reason, I'm afraid!" laughed Captain Midnight. "Well, if you insist."

And he held open the door with his usual polite attention, to allow Belle to precede him, on her way to the ranch kitchen.

This brought her out of doors, so that she heard him shout cheerily to the men:

"Come, boys! No more night-hawking! Every mother's son turns into a warm bunk; and Miss Blackwood has agreed to give us all a night-cap. What do you say to a cup of her royal coffee?"

"We say three cheers an' a tigah! Eh, boys? Up she goes, a-boomin'!"

And they were not grudging in their testimonial of appreciation.

But as the girl, unable to look about her with the thought of her treachery, though its end was good, entered the kitchen, a curious smile formed about Captain Midnight's lips, and he quietly passed the word to his men that no drop of that beverage should pass their lips.

The men stared at him blankly, with their suspicion in their faces.

"Don't be fools, boys," he said, coolly. "She don't mean to poison us. But you're not to drink it, all the same, though you appear to."

He went back to Mad Blackwood, and seizing him by the wrist to fix his attention, he spoke too low for Spot, if he chanced to be awake, to hear, yet earnestly enough to show Leon that it was no time for trifling.

"Blackwood, you have been having a circus for your own amusement. Now I require that you extend the performance for my benefit."

"What is the matter?"

"Hush! Listen to me! You can ask questions to-morrow."

"Go ahead! You always have your own way!" whined Leon, querulously.

"Your sister is going to bring you some coffee. When she comes with it, you act in any way you please; but see that you detain her in this room for at least two minutes. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't understand! What is this all about?"

"That is not to the purpose. You are to keep her here for two minutes, if she shows a desire to go out. You had better take it for granted that she will, and begin your acting at once. See that you don't fail!"

And though there was nothing of menace in Captain Midnight's words or looks, there was a subtle something in his way of saying it that made his final injunction imperative.

He at once turned to leave, as if the gratifica-

CHAPTER XX.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

"LET me lie down!" petitioned Mad Blackwood, with piteous weakness.

tion of Blackwood's natural curiosity was no concern to him.

But at the door he stopped abruptly.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "That's better yet! By the way, Blackwood, if I come in with her to see how you are, you will appear all right, and not detain us with any foolishness; but if she comes alone, you are to carry out my previous instructions to the letter. Or, on second thought, put it the other way. If she is alone, you do nothing to keep her; but if I accompany her, you let yourself out. That will give me a chance to see you act, than which I enjoy nothing better."

It was evident that the captain was elaborating his plot on the spur of the moment; and new combinations flitted through his active brain treading on one another's heels.

But before Mad Blackwood could vent his piqued curiosity, he was gone.

"Hang him!" growled the blind fool, "I hate him, yet I cannot tear myself away from him! Am I a machine that he is to play upon me at his will?"

Nevertheless, he had no thought of disobeying.

From his instruction of Blackwood Captain Midnight went to the ranch kitchen, where he was in time to hear the cook say:

"They gags at my guzzle, do they? Waal, they'll git it all the same in the mornin', an' it won't be none the better with age. Not as I kicks at steppin' down an' out fur you, Miss Blackwood. But ef any o' them snoozers 'lows as they kin better my brewin' or my bakin', they're welcome to take the job off my hands."

The cook stood with the huge coffee-pot in hand, preparatory to emptying it for the lady's use.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Captain Midnight, as he entered. "You're getting the grand bounce, old Slumgudgeon, eh?"

"I'm bowin' to the lady!" replied the cook, in a way that was truly courtly.

"What! had you coffee waiting for us?"

"Better'n them mugwumps desarve, a heap! But I don't blame 'em fur kickin' when they see a show like this hyar."

And the cook emptied his steaming decoction into a pail, rinsed out the pot, and supplied it with fresh water for Belle's use.

"Well, I'll leave you to take a lesson by which I hope we shall all profit in the future."

All of which plausibility did not prevent the captain from signaling the cook to follow him, as he passed out.

"Doc," he said, addressing the "pot-wrestler" by his professional title when they were alone together, "make an excuse to leave Miss Blackwood by herself till that coffee is prepared. Then, when she goes out with me, slip into the kitchen, and pour out a single cup of coffee, and hide it where she will not run across it by accident, but where you can get at it handy. After which, you slip out again, so that she will not suspect that the room has been entered by any one in her absence."

"She will return to the kitchen, and be there alone again for some little time.

"When she goes to carry his cup to her brother, you go back and pour the coffee of her making into the pail where yours now is, and your coffee back into the pot where hers now is. Then you get the cup which you have hidden, and put it with the others—where you can put your hand on it, mind! Lastly, when she returns from giving her brother his cup, she must find you pouring the coffee for the boys."

"Do you understand? It will be what you have made, but she will think that it is what she has made. The cup that you have hidden will be of her own making. That you give to me to pass to her, and she will not discover the exchange."

"Now, Doc, don't get this thing mixed, or you're a dead man!"

"Great Caesar, Cap! she ain't 'lowin' to p'izen the lot of us?"

"Bah! Would she poison her brother? I mean, if you fail, I'll knock you out!"

"But what's the reason she don't drink the same as we do?"

"Do you fancy she wouldn't discover the difference between what you make and what she does? I, for one, don't believe her taste is so perverted! But, what is that to you? Don't you drink your own coffee? And you know whether you have put any poison in it or not. Besides, I shall drink it along with you. I have defeated all your efforts to give me the black vomit so far; and I'll risk another dose!"

"All right, Cap. I kin stand it if you kin. I've stood the whisky you buy fur us, an' blame poor whisky it is, too!"

And having "come back" at the laughing captain to his satisfaction, the cook betook him to the execution of his commission.

Captain Midnight next went to his men.

"Boys, I'm on to a new scheme. You drink your coffee all right, but understand it's of Doc's making."

A murmur of discontent arose at this announcement.

"No kicking!" commanded the captain. "You drink it with sweeter smiles than you have ever drank it with before, and praise it the best you know how. The lady will think

that you are getting what she has made, and you are not to let her know by the slightest sign that she is mistaken—to your cost! Do you understand? You are to drink the coffee as if it was hers, and smack your lips over it, and cheer her to the echo."

Nobody thought of demanding an explanation of this strange proceeding. It was plain that their leader had sufficient reasons for the course he chose to pursue.

Meanwhile Belle was in sore perplexity.

When she proposed to make the coffee, she assumed that she would be in possession of the opiate while employed in its decoction. Had Captain Midnight misunderstood her intention of administering the sedative in her brother's coffee?

She did not like to press for it, yet if she waited till Leon's cup had been poured out, there might be no chance to "doctor" the rest.

And here was the best of opportunities passing unimproved. The cook was busy in the dining-room setting out the cups. This done, he would probably be at her elbow, so as effectually to defeat her purpose.

In this provoking situation, when the coffee was filling the room with its grateful aroma, Captain Midnight appeared at the door, and said:

"By the way, Miss Blackwood, if you will come with me, we will get the anodyne."

With her heart in her throat, she followed him.

She stood by him while he opened his medicine-chest, explaining that he had a sort of amateur knowledge of drugs, which came in very handy in a country where you generally had to sober up your doctor to put him in a condition to prescribe.

He showed her how much would suffice for a single dose, not more than two or three times as big as a pin's head, and then gave her the bottle which contained the drug, remarking that she might have more or less use for it for two or three days, till Leon was himself again, and adding with a laugh that there was enough in the vial to give half of Cony Flat its final quietus.

Belle thanked him in a choking voice, and then, with a swimming of the head and a sense of oppression at the lungs, went back to the execution of her plot.

True to his instructions, the cook had slyly abstracted a single cup of the liquid now ready for use.

With trembling hands and quaking knees, Belle estimated the amount of morphia that would insure a good dose to each drinker of a single cup, without making two cups actually dangerous. In this matter, however, she reflected that if any road-agent brought his fate upon himself by being too appreciative of her skill, her justification lay in the fact that it was life against life, and they were the aggressors.

Before dropping the drug into the coffee-pot, she poured out two cups, one for herself and one for her brother.

In the latter she put the dose prescribed by Captain Midnight, while the former she set aside, to be drank if she was called upon to join the drinkers of her health.

This did not escape the eye of Captain Midnight; and during his attendance upon Leon he treated himself to the grateful beverage, and set the empty cup with the others, while the cook hastily made the interchange which consigned the drugged liquor to the pail, and his own decoction to the coffee-pot.

"Come, Miss Blackwood," urged the captain, appearing at the door of her hut. "The boys are waiting to drink your health."

She went to find the cook, as arranged, pouring out the steaming beverage.

"Here you are!" said the captain, cheerily, handing her one which appeared to her to be taken at random, though in fact it was the one which the cook had abstracted before it received its narcotic infusion.

"Thank you," she said. "I have a cup sitting here which I poured out to taste."

She turned to where she had left it, only to her dismay to find it gone.

"Was that thar your cup, Miss Blackwood?" asked the cook, innocently. "Waal, now, I 'lowed as it was some o' my own p'izen; so I pitched it out, to git the use o' the cup."

"That don't matter. Here is a plenty."

And the captain smilingly tendered the cup again.

With an intense pallor Belle took it. She tried to smile her thanks, but the smile was only a sickly grimace.

Was she to be caught in her own trap? Of what avail that the others be asleep, if she was incapacitated to take advantage of it?

No one seemed to notice her disturbance.

Captain Midnight turned to the boys, and proposed her health in a gallant little speech.

The boys cheered, and raised their cups to their lips.

"Now, our queen!" said the captain, looking at her over the brim of his cup.

It was impossible to refuse to drink. All eyes were upon her expectantly.

With a feeling that fate was against her, she lifted the cup to her lips, and drank with a sickening shudder.

CHAPTER XXI.

BLIGHTED HOPES.

BUT the thought of losing everything just when it was within her grasp was too terrible. In that moment of agonized suspense a sudden inspiration came to her, and she resorted to deception.

"What is that?" she cried, withdrawing the cup from her lips when she had taken not more than two or three reluctant swallows.

And with her head half-turned, she listened as if for the repetition of some sound from her own cabin.

"It is nothing. You are mistaken," answered the captain, pretending also to listen.

"It is my brother, or—or—the stranger. Excuse me, gentlemen!"

And making a move to set her cup down, but on second thought concluding to carry it with her, she hastened from the room.

"Put it down deep, boys," said the captain, with a mysterious smile. "Everything is all right now."

And setting the example, he swallowed his own share.

Wondering what had been going on, the boys followed his example, some of them a little gingerly.

"And now to bed!" he proposed. "And see here! If any one of you are sleepless, make it a point not to turn out, whatever you think you bear. Do you understand? I want no meddling. The one thing worse than a negligent servant, is an over-zealous one."

Meanwhile, Belle's imagination was playing sorry tricks with her.

To begin with, she fancied that the coffee tasted bitter, and wondered that the men had swallowed it without suspicion.

Then she was sure that it had left a peculiar taste in her mouth, and she tried hard to persuade herself that she felt nauseated.

In vain did she tell herself that two or three swallows could have no decided effect. She was sure that a subtle drowsiness was creeping over her.

She would have sought relief in an emetic; but, lacking it, she walked the floor to keep herself awake, at the risk of keeping her brother awake also.

On his entrance she had sought to induce Leon to tell her what had happened to him; but an unusually harsh rebuff had silenced her.

His comfort provided for, she had climbed into the loft which extended over the two lower rooms, to give him the impression that she intended to pass the night there.

Now, from time to time, she crept to the scuttle and listened, to assure herself that he was asleep.

For a time he was feverishly restless. She could hear his tossing and turning, his growls of savage impatience, the half-suppressed cry with which he started from a nightmare.

But at last he slept heavily, his senses fast locked by the potency of the drug.

To her strained anxiety the time seemed hours, though in fact it was but half an hour at most.

Then she crept down the ladder, and once more out of doors.

Not a sound broke the dead silence of the night, except an occasional restless movement in the stable.

As for the human habitations, they were so still that all within them might be lying dead.

A chill of dread crept over the listening girl. What if she had miscalculated the amount of the drug, and wrapped the whole camp in death forever!

Clouds had formed since the robbery, and at times the moon was obscured, though during the intervals it was still as light as day.

Taking advantage of one of these periods, she crept to the structure where she knew the captain and his men slept.

Her blood flowed warm again, when she heard several of them snoring rhythmically.

Then she made her way to the stable.

The horses knew her well. Those that were lying asleep only opened their eyes, with that brute vigilance which man does not rival unless he is environed with constant dangers. Others turned their heads her way, but with that slow turning of the ears which is a welcome without apprehension.

Her own little mare whinnied softly, in greeting.

Belle went up to her, and fondled her muzzle. "I have use for you to-night, my pet!" she whispered. "See that you bear me to my happiness!"

The mare nibbled her mistress's cheek tenderly.

Thad Burchard's mustang betrayed no disturbance at her approach, and permitted himself to be handled at her will.

"I would not take you if I had a right to a better," she said. "But I should have trouble with Cap's black charger; and with him in pursuit no other would avail much. If the worst comes, he shall have my little mare. Vixen will hold her own, even against Black Warrior."

Tearing a blanket, she made muffs for the mustang's feet, and so led him from the stable,

straining her eyes and ears to detect any one moving.

The darkness hid her, and the sothing of the wind drowned the unavoidable noises she made.

When she had gained a safe distance from the ranch, she returned for her own mare.

Then she went to her hut, and crept into the room where Spot the Sparkler had once more succumbed to sleep.

Satisfied that no harm would be allowed to come to him if his nurse could prevent it, Spot had quieted his apprehensions, and resolved to take the chances his fate surrounded him with.

It was perhaps a mark of the man's high courage, that his pillow was not haunted by the troubled dreams the situation would seem to warrant. Instead, he was drifting with the easy current of a very pleasant vision, in which Belle Blackwood bore a charming part, when he was aroused by a hand shaking him gently, and a voice whispering:

"Hush! Do not be alarmed—it is only I."

"What is the matter?" he asked, feeling that a crisis was at hand, in spite of her assurance.

"Get up and dress, but quietly. We must fly from here. You must find the strength somehow. Here is more of the liquor. You must use any means to sustain yourself till we get away. I cannot tell you the circumstances now. But everything is in readiness. Do not lose any unnecessary time."

"Do not fear for me," he replied. "Your nursing has made a new man of me. I will be with you in a moment."

Did she press his hand? Her head was in a whirl. She did not know whether she had given this betrayal of her feelings or not, as she hastened from the room, to stand in that where her brother slept, with bated breath.

The celerity with which he got into his clothes reassured her. It indicated returned strength.

Then she heard him groping his way toward the door, and she opened it, to seize hold of his hand again, and guide him to the outer door.

Her hand trembled in his, and she dropped it the moment they reached the door.

"Oh, I hope that you are strong again!" she whispered, when they were once outside.

"I am surprised at myself," he answered.

"Hush!" she cautioned. "Wait till we are beyond danger. Now, follow me closely, while the shadow lasts."

He obeyed; and they gained the horses without disturbance from a figure that stood motionless in the shelter of a dense copse, whence all that had occurred could be observed.

"She is exceedingly devoted!" said Captain Midnight to himself, with a quiet laugh. "It might change her plans somewhat, could she see me here."

"Now, if Colston does the rest of his work as cleverly as he—assisted by fate—has managed so far, everything will be lovely inside of eighteen hours!"

Little dreaming of this complaisant espionage, Belle Blackwood was hurrying her charge forward to where she had left the horses.

"You—" On discovering that she had provided two horses instead of one, he set out to say:

"You intend to accompany me?"

But he thought better of that, and put the question less direct.

"Two horses?"

"I shall see you far enough on your way so that there will be no danger of your getting lost again," she answered, with a swift flush in her cheek, as she divined what he had suppressed.

What was his thought?" she asked herself. Did he imagine that, having saved him she would throw herself on his protection?

"But your return?" he asked. "Have you nothing to fear from the knowledge that you have aided me to escape?"

"There is nothing that I dare not face."

"But am I to part with you so, in uncertainty as to what difficulty I have got you into?"

Was he anxious for her welfare? Did he part with her reluctantly?

The girl's breath began to come fast and fluttering, in spite of her efforts to appear calm.

Her love for him was of too passionate a character for her to feel that it could elicit no return. She was ready to believe that it was mutual.

Why this tremendous upheaval of her nature, after years of indifference to all suitors, unless it was to be the crown of her life.

It is hard for us to believe that we are to be the victims of fate, though we see wrecks all about us.

She could not look at him, as she answered:

"Whatever my fate, I shall not regret it, if—"

"If I have saved you," was what trembled on her lips. Running upon the words unawares, they filled her with dismay. Did she wear her heart so openly that she must needs betray it at every step?

With a sense of rage at herself, mingled with a longing that he might know, or guess, she said abruptly:

"But we must be going. Are you strong enough to undertake such a task? I have put food in your saddlebags, and a bottle of the spirits."

"You forget nothing. How can I thank you for your care?"

So! He was grateful; but he parted with her with a polite phrase!

With a sudden burst of rage, she answered:

"There is no need of thanks. The only question is, are you able to ride?"

She looked at him now with eyes that did not evade his.

She might have been estimating the strength of an iron girder of certain dimensions, by the coolness of her glance.

Spot was surprised at the sudden change. But regarded it with a man's perplexity. What had he said that angered her?

As she looked at him, pale and even trembling, she saw that he was far from being as strong as his prompt response had led her to suppose.

The moon revealed a man who yet ought to be in bed.

At that her heart failed her, and her momentary pique flashed out of existence.

It was a woman with her heart in her eyes and voice that suddenly reached out a hand and placed it on his arm, with a piteously quavering:

"Oh, you are ill! You cannot endure the strain, if we are pursued. What shall we do?"

Then her eyes blazed, and her nostrils dilated and quivered.

"We can fight at least, if it comes to that!" she said, fiercely.

"You are mistaken," was Spot's assurance. "I am better than I look. See if I cannot gain that saddle in a very different way from the mount of twelve or fifteen hours ago."

Setting his teeth and holding his breath, that the effort it cost him might not appear in his movements, he rose in the stirrup and swung his leg over the cantle of the saddle.

But as he settled into place, it was with an involuntary sigh of relief.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed, looking down into the anxious face uplifted to his. "See the un-gallantry you have betrayed me into, by playing upon my egotism. I have secured myself without assisting you."

And he started to dismount again.

"Oh, no! no! no!" she cried, restraining him. "I invariably mount alone. See?"

And she sprung into the saddle with an ease and grace that surprised him.

"And now," he asked, "will you tell me the meaning of this precipitate flight? We have not yet decided the prudence of your returning to a place of such questionable safety."

Did he care, after all? Was it coming?

The thought that a word from him would prove the Rubicon of her life, the uncertainty as to what that word would be, filled her with terror, and led her to seek to defer the issue.

"Wait till we are in safety," she answered.

"Come!"

And she pressed forward without giving him time to insist.

Their escape was timely. They had less than an hour's ride before daybreak.

Coming out upon a well-defined mountain road at last, Belle indicated Spot's course to him.

"This way," she said, "lies Cony Flat. That way you must hasten your flight. You will not be safe till you reach Tenstrike."

"But why not Cony Flat?" asked Spot. "I have a horse that I must be thinking of returning to his owner, or I shall soon find myself wanted!"

And he laughed carelessly at the implication of his words.

"You can send the horse from Tenstrike. But do not trust yourself at Cony Flat again, unless you have a plenty of personal backers."

"Why not?"

"Captain Midnight bears almost absolute sway there. No one dares to withstand him. And you may depend that there are few men at Cony Flat of the kind that are likely to run any risk in behalf of a stranger."

Spot recalled what he had heard of Captain Midnight, and the manner in which his name was received at the Flat.

Spot looked at the girl wistfully. She was very pale. He did not guess how wildly her heart was beating.

Of course, after what had passed when she supposed him unconscious in slumber, he knew, without coxcombry, that she had done what she had done for him from personal preference. But, that preference aside, was she not one of this villainous band?

She was believed to be a decoy. Was there any reason for doubting that she had used her beauty to allure men to their death? Would not she do it again?

It is hard to believe evil of a beautiful woman, and more especially if she has shown the good taste to appreciate your personal attractions.

But this girl was living with men whom she admitted to be murderers. She herself was ready enough with the revolver where her affections were not involved.

Her tenderness—But, no doubt, a wolf is kind to its mate!

Still Spot could not entirely divest himself of a wish to interfere for her reclamation.

"Suppose I could use her liking for me"—he

called it *liking!*—"to cut loose from them, and start life again in a better way?"

Did he fancy that that was a promising start?—with the bitterness of disappointed "liking!"

He found it a difficult thing to look her in the face and ask her point-blank if she was an accomplice of murderers, and whether she didn't think it would be a good plan to seek more worthy associates. So he had recourse to indirection.

"Are you sure that you can go back there with safety?" he asked.

To a lover such a return would have been intolerable. He was arguing the advisability of it, only with a view of freeing himself from a sense of responsibility.

A throe of anguish pierced the girl's heart. It was all hopeless. He was as indifferent to her as she had been to others.

She recalled the evidences of feeling that Nick Rathbun had displayed. It occurred to her that his craving for her was like her craving for this stranger who had come across her path. Could it be that both were equally hopeless? How utterly unresponsive was her heart to Nick's appeals! When he pressed them, they had filled her with loathing. Could the witness of her passion move this man so to repulsion?

The thought maddened her.

"Rest easy as far as I am concerned," she said, sharply. "I am at home there. And so, good-by!"

She did not offer her hand, but wheeled her horse sharply—perhaps partly to hide the spasm of pain that distorted her face at the realization that this was the last.

"Good-by!" Spot called after her. "I shall never forget your kindness."

She did not answer him further, but spurred her horse into a gallop.

It appeared as if she intended to let nothing intervene between their leave-taking and her return to the ranch; but this was far from the truth.

She was scarcely out of sight and hearing, when she drew in her horse and leaped from the saddle, to cast herself on the ground and there writhe in anguish of spirit.

"I will kill myself! I will kill myself! Ah, why do I live?" she panted, hoarsely.

A dog would have understood these throes of human pain, and would have manifested sympathetic distress. The little mare gazed at her mistress with unemotional equine interest, knowing that something unusual appeared in her demeanor, yet plainly with no comprehension of its nature.

Presently the girl sat up, and with her hands tightly clinched in her lap, stared straight before her at a point in the ground a few feet distant, yet not seeing that, but gazing beyond into vacancy.

She was trying to realize that the most tremendous calamity of life had befallen her, leaving her future to stretch away a barren desert to the horizon which marks the meeting of the here and the hereafter.

In this moment of utter prostration she accepted without question the award of fate. It did not occur to her that anything could be done to retrieve the situation.

In her own nature love sprung spontaneously. That it was a thing which might be won, was a thought which did not come to her readily.

The man who had aroused her soul, had seen her, and had gone away unmoved!

How long she sat thus, she never knew. She was startled into renewed consciousness of her surroundings by a series of menacing shouts.

With a wild thrill at the heart she sprung to her feet, then into the saddle, and even stood erect on her horse's back, to reach an elevation which would enable her to look over the tops of the intervening growth of shrubbery, and see what was going on in the mountain road which she had left.

She discovered a company of horsemen dashing forward at full speed, shaking their fists and weapons above their heads, and with their wrathful eyes fixed all in one direction.

On a distant mountain-side she saw a solitary rider, stopping a moment to look back, to discover the source of this menacing yell.

"It is he!" she cried, with her hand pressed suddenly to her heart. "They are in pursuit of him! Not Captain Midnight, but the men of Cony Flat! Ab, heaven!"

And with a cry of fear and resentment, she dropped into the saddle, and spurred furiously in pursuit.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MAN-HUNTERS.

WHEN Nick Rathbun returned to Cony Flat, it was with a fixed purpose to destroy his rival, by raising a party to raid the ranch in the absence of its chief, and fasten the conviction of theft on Spot the Sparkler by discovering him in this suspicious company.

Little suspecting that he was playing into the hands of Captain Midnight, Nick lost no time in trying to arouse public sentiment against Spot.

"Burchard has begun to show uneasiness at the delayed return of his horse," he reflected.

"And Spot is already regarded askance as a

sharper, thanks to his little trick on his Honor, Judge Spoopendyke, and his readiness with Bully Bill."

The Crystal Palace was thronged as usual, when Nick entered. He was gratified to find Thad Burchard among the number, wearing a long and portentous face.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I am a comparative stranger to you; but I fancy that what you have seen of me has not been calculated to prejudice you against me."

"You will allow me to say, sir," replied Judge Spoopendyke, "speaking for myself alone, that I for one have been prepossessed in your favor. I believe that I express the general sentiment of the community, when I say that you will be well received whenever you choose to honor Cony Flat with your society."

There was a sort of tacit assent to this, the men regarding Nick with curious expectancy.

"Gentlemen, I thank you for this expression of good-will," said Nick, who had a politician's tact in making the most of the slightest mark of favor—"the more since I have an appeal to make to you."

"I need not remind you—I see that the owner of the animal is here present—that a certain horse of considerable value was rented to a stranger several days ago, which has not yet been returned."

At this reminder a wave of interest swept through the assemblage; and with a face suddenly grown purple, Thad Burchard pressed forward.

"Pardner," he said, "you couldn't give us a pointer as to the whereabouts o' that same animal?"

"Quite easily. I saw him scarcely an hour ago. At no time has he been more than ten miles from this spot."

"Is that so, boss?"

"Don't you wish it was the big black, now?" asked Josh Colston, sarcastically.

"The horse is more easily recognized by reason of his odd marking," observed Nick.

"Kin you put me on to that thing, pardner?" asked the proprietor.

"It means fight!"

"I'll give him all the fight he wants. Show me his roost."

"You will have to have backers."

"I reckon that's men in Cony Flat who has known me long enough to be willin' to see me have a fair shake. Ef that ain't so, I'd as leave know it now as any time."

He looked about for assurance of the justice of his faith.

Judge Spoopendyke took it upon himself, as usual, to speak for his fellow-townsmen.

"Thad Burchard has been known, an' well known, in Cony Flat sence the first tent-stake was drove. When he wants backin', all he's got to do is to say so."

This received animated confirmation. Thad was popular with his fellows.

"One more remark, gentlemen," promised Nick. "I reckon it ain't necessary for me to say that the lessee of the hoss in question has already made something of a reputation for himself in this community, notwithstanding the shortness of his stay."

The manner of saying is often more effective than the words spoken.

Every face in the eager circle of listeners darkened.

"A card-sharp!" cried a voice. "The jedge, he knows that."

"An' handy enough with the poppers to make Bully Bill take water."

"That's all right, gents," interposed Bully Bill, with cool effrontery, considering that a man who has publicly "crawfished" generally loses caste in the West. "Bully Bill knows when he's down, he does. An' he happens to have heyeared about this hyar gent before. Maybe the lot o' ye "disremember" Sonora Jim, that ill-fated individual being a pure creation of Bully Bill's imagination, for the occasion. But it answered just as well. No one thought of questioning the fact on the strength of his own ignorance."

"Bully Bill," went on Bully Bill himself, "never butts his head up ag'in' a stone wall. A dead-sure thing, gents, is a mighty good thing to know enough to pass. But no game ain't played out in the fu'st hand; an' ef yer high-cockalorum hadn't cl'ared out quite so airly in the mornin', I reckon he'd 'a' heyeared from Bully Bill. His chance is good yit!"

With this vindication of his position, Bully Bill yielded the floor. No one suspected his conviction that Spot the Sparkler lay dead with Bully Bill's bullet in his brain. None of the real anxiety with which he awaited the development of Nick Rathbun's revelations appeared in his manner.

Without directly saying so, he had intimated that Spot had killed a man under circumstances similar to those of the few nights previous; and every one had got the impression that he was a notorious desperado.

Congratulating himself on the unexpected support he was receiving, Nick Rathbun resumed:

"Waal, gents, I don't know how many men this hyar galoot has rubbed out over the card-

table; but I do know whar he has this gent's hoss; an' if you'll git together twenty or thirty men at daybreak, I'll guarantee to take you whar all you'll have to do is to lead him out of the stable."

"Whar is he?"

"Jest one word further, an' we'll come to the point."

"From what you saw the other night, you'll not be surprised to be told that I have some interest in lookin' up Captain Midnight an' his friends."

This turn of the subject was like the dashing of a bucket of water over a bed of glowing coals.

Every face fell, and on all sides the men drew perceptibly back.

"What!" cried Rathbun, with affected astonishment. "Does the mere mention of the name of Captain Midnight take all the starch out o' the men o' Cony Flat? Waal, I've seen—But thar! I hain't nothin' more to say!"

But he had already said enough to sting all present into a galling sense of their united cowardice.

Oaths burst from the lips of a score of them at once. With blazing eyes and flushed faces, they announced their readiness to meet Captain Midnight or any one else who had given them just cause for retaliation.

"That's better!" declared Nick; "for you don't git yer hoss without callin' on Captain Midnight. That ain't sayin'," he went on, as through all their bluster he saw signs of uneasiness in the faces of the men, "as you need drop in while he's at home. But thar's whar you'll find yer hoss; an' thar's whar you'll find Mister Man what rented him—oh, yes! He's waitin' for ye to come an' collect the rent, he is!"

"We'll go, an' take a rope along!" shouted Thad Burchard.

His most intimate friends seconded him.

"All right," said Rathbun. "Thar ain't no hurry. You'll have a quieter, ef not more enjoyable time ef you go a while after daybreak."

Whether or not this delay was judicious, in view of the fact that human ardor is apt to cool with waiting, the public resentment was destined to receive a new impulse on the arrival of the coach.

Six-shot Johnny alighted, and turned to assist a lady so prostrated, that he appealed to one of the crowd to take the other side of her.

Her fragile beauty brought all under her dominion at a glance, and half a dozen sprung to her aid. He shared with Jack Kerby the envy of the crowd who was privileged to pass his arm through hers, and receive her smile of thanks.

When she had passed to the care of the landlady of the Crystal Palace, Jack might have drunk himself blind in a series of treats before he opened his mouth—that is, to speak.

"Waal, gents," was his opening announcement, "we have been held up— Ah!"

And to the amazement of everybody, he broke off abruptly, and covered Thad Burchard with his revolver.

"Hands up!" he shouted.

So astounded was Thad, that for a moment he could only stare in open-mouthed bewilderment.

But the ominous click of Six-shot Johnny's revolver, and the wicked look in his eye, combined with the knowledge that in that country such a challenge invariably means business, sent his hands up to the proper elevation, while he gasped:

"What in Cain has gone with you? You don't want nothin' o' me."

"I don't, eh? We'll see about that. So you got in ahead of us, did ye? Waal, you can't bluff yer uncle—not when he's got you down so fine as at present."

"What's the row with Thad?" demanded one of his friends.

"Nothin'!—only a leetle matter o' road-agentin'!"

"Road-agentin' be blowed!" cried Thad in fierce indignation. "The galoot's drunk. Cover him, Sol!"

"Hold on, gentlemen!" interposed Judge Spoopendyke. "Go slow, ef you please. Justice kin be done in a leetle more reg'lar way. What is your charge ag'in' Thad?"

"He held us up. I was jest startin' to tell ye when I spotted him. He's cut in ahead of us, an' now he 'lows to cheek it out. But he's got a bed-rock cheek ef he stands me off."

"He's a continental liar!" roared Thad, vociferously. "Everybody knows as I hain't been away from right hyar. How could I hold his infernal stage up, when I never see it?"

"Go slow! go slow!" cautioned the judge. "We're more like to git at the true inwardness o' this thing ef we start at the beginnin'."

"Fetch his boss hyar—the spotted one," demanded Kerby. "Then you show the critter to Billy Boston, an' see ef he don't sw'ar as it is the same as we see not an hour ago. Ef you 'low as he's standin' in with me, ask the lady."

"That was a mighty good blind, Thad," he went on, with the familiarity so often seen between the thief and the thief-taker. "But you'd orter take a hoss, ag'in' accidents, what everybody in the country don't know by sight."

"Hold on!" cried Thad. "What hoss was this hyar?"

"Your liver-spotted mustang, pard."

"Spot the Sparkler!" exclaimed Bob Bryce, in a burst of astonishment.

"Oho! oho!" ejaculated Josh Colston, in exultant triumph. "How's that, pardner? Oh, I kin see as fur through an oak plank as most folks, I kin!"

"Road-agintin'!" repeated Thad, lugubrious-ly. "Waal, thar's a mighty good hoss gone to blazes!"

But here Nick Rathbun took a hand.

"What's the reason it is? Look a-hyar, gents—that's the man we're after. It's jest as easy to hang him fur road-agentin' as fur hoss-stealin'." What's the reason it ain't?"

"Drop yer popper, Kerby. Thad ain't your meat," declared Judge Spoopendyke.

"What be you gents gittin' through ye. I tell ye, we got him dead to rights."

"You got the hoss all right; but Thad he wa'n't on him. We're makin' up to set out to look fur the gent as was on that hoss, now."

Six-foot Johnny put up his revolver, but with apparent reluctance, and as if only half-persuaded.

Then he gave the story of the holding up of the coach in detail, and nobody needed any further proof that Spot the Sparkler was the guilty man.

But what of his association with Captain Midnight? To run a solitary criminal to earth is one thing; to take him from the protection of so redoubtable a chief, is quite another.

"Gents," said Bob Bryce, impressively, "don't bite off more'n you kin chaw!"

"Ef you hain't got the sand to face the music," said Nick Rathbun, "jest you keep out of it."

"Oh, I goes with the crowd!" answered Bob, quite unconcernedly. "I gives ye the hint fur what it's worth. Ef it gags ye, I don't lay out fur to ram it down nobody's throat."

There seemed to be danger that the awe in which Captain Midnight was held would paralyze the yearnings to vindicate the law of these impromptu sovereigns. For the honor of the camp, Judge Spoopendyke thought it necessary to make a speech to rouse their flagging virtues.

He might have been a little surprised to know that those who responded first and most enthusiastically to his appeals were creatures of Captain Midnight, acting under directions.

Six-shot Johnny, indeed, supported him in a burst of impassioned eloquence that was quite astonishing, all things considered.

Josh Colston only insisted that they "fetch the hoss, ef they had to fetch him through fire an' brimstun!"

The ball thus set to rolling, enthusiasm mounted so high that the party which set out at daybreak gave promise of some effective work.

"We'll break the yoke o' this hyar tyranny what's rid on the neck o' this young an' growin' metropolis so long!" declared Judge Spoopendyke, with that grand flourish for which he was so justly celebrated.

It was arranged that Nick Rathbun should guide them to the vicinity of Captain Midnight's camp, where they should lie in hiding till a reconnoissance should prove that Cap himself, and such of his men as might be, had taken their departure, leaving the coast clear for a sudden descent upon the ranch and the capture of Spot the Sparkler.

Nick had assured them that Spot was hurt, so that he would be unable to accompany Captain Midnight; for which Six-shot Johnny had accounted by stating that the robber had had a fall from his horse sufficient to lay him up, even if he had escaped the shots that had been sent after him in his flight.

So it came about that, partly by management, and partly by chance, they came in sight of Spot just in time to make him fall into a fatal blunder.

Belle, through her fears, had started him in the wrong direction for the appearance of innocence; and when he heard the yell of the man-hunters, instead of going toward them, as he would have done had he known that they were men from Cony Flat, he, under the impression that they were Captain Midnight and his crowd, fled before them.

One moment he turned in the saddle to see the crowd speeding toward him, flourishing their weapons menacingly, and yelling their hatred. The next he dug his spurs into the flanks of his horse, feeling that, with so inferior an animal, no time was to be lost if he would reach Tenstrike before they overtook him.

So the race began, the hunters yelling with rage as he disappeared around a shoulder of the mountain, and the girl who loved him setting out in pursuit of them, her heart bursting with dread at the thought of his falling into their ruthless clutches.

She knew the spirit of the community. She knew the fear in which Captain Midnight was held. If Spot was overtaken, the prime movers of the pursuit might seek to dispatch him on the spot, before the possibility of interference.

She knew that the men were from Cony Flat, and feared that Spot's laughing prediction had come true, and he was being pursued for horse-theft. She knew also that nothing could put him in greater hazard of his life.

Would she be in time to testify in his favor? Would her testimony avail? The testimony of a reputed decoy of Captain Midnight! That was the most terrible doubt of all.

With her heart in her throat, she sought the chance of at least fighting for him, dying with him, if need be!

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MAD AVOWAL.

NICK RATHBUN was delighted at the way in which everything was playing, as he supposed, into his hands.

As a stranger, he could not have hoped to awaken the same warm enthusiasm that would naturally be taken in the interest of one of their fellow-townsmen.

Thad Burchard was popular, and his friends were ready to back him "for all they were worth."

Thad was mounted on the big black; and egged on by Josh Colston, who did not let him forget that but for him he would now be on the mustang and Spot the Sparkler on the black, he led the van with a very ugly look of revenge on his face.

So white and determined, indeed, did he look, so silent was he, that Judge Spoopendyke thought it necessary to interpose the warning:

"Ye ain't to do no pernicious shootin' on yer own account, Thad, ye understand. This community backs you fur yer rights; but it stands fur law an' order jest the same."

Thad thought that the judge was talking one for law and order and two for his own importance; but he knew that it wouldn't pay to "buck ag'in" the chief of the town; so he only interposed the ominous proviso:

"Barrin' accidents!"

Then he rode as before, with set teeth and dogged resolve.

Away they went, stretching out in a straggling line as mile after mile was passed.

In no hunt, as in a man-hunt, are the pursuers so eager to "be in at the death."

Spurred by wild yells, the horses took the contagion of excitement from their riders. But they were not of equal powers; and in that mad rush, wind and muscle left unstayed pluck behind.

But victory is not always to the strong, nor the race always to the fleet.

Here one missed his footing, and horse and rider rolled nobody stopped to see where; there one collided with a rival, to receive injuries that no amount of swearing would mend.

But Thad Burchard rode ever in the van, with Judge Spoopendyke hovering on his flank, as if to see that his prohibition was not infringed.

Nick Rathbun was well-mounted, and did not spare the spur.

Jack Kerby was never far behind.

Josh Colston managed to keep near enough so that Thad should not lose a sense of his vicinity.

Bob Bryce—he of the ready chin—had the chagrin of seeing his horse flag and fall hopelessly behind.

"Waal," he reflected, philosophically, "perhaps it's all well that we can't all be cocks-o'-the-walk at everythin'."

"But you'd orter have wind enough fur yerself an' the hoss too, Bob," suggested a fellow in misfortune.

Before he could reply to this thrust at his well-known weakness, Bob's attention was distracted by a furious clatter of hoofs, and the rush by him of a horse that made his own seem almost to stand still.

Voiceless, with her eyes strained straight before her, Belle Blackwood plied spur and whip, and the little mare responded with a spirit that won plaudits from all beholders.

Whatever his personal interest in the struggle, the true Westerner never fails of admiration for a display of pluck, of skill, of endurance.

As the love and fear-goaded woman sped by one after another of the laggards, she was cheered, though all suspected that she was going to the succor of the fugitive.

On, on—ever goading to a spurt of renewed effort the horse she was overtaking, only to break his courage and leave him disheartened behind, the little mare passed one and all in a succession of hotly-contested races, till Nick Rathbun turned his head, his attention attracted by yells that had lost their cadence of hatred.

"Octavia!" he ejaculated.

Then his face whitened with jealous rage, and he resolved to intercept her course.

"Hold!" he shouted, keeping his horse at full speed, yet reining him directly before her.

"Out of my way!" she returned, in a voice the inflexible resolve of which he might have understood.

"You are going to your lover! You lied to me!" he cried.

She paid no attention to that.

"Do you intend to let me pass?" she demanded.

"Never!"

With white, set lips she forced her horse ahead till she had overlapped the quarters of the animal Nick bestrode.

The jealousy-maddened man reached out and seized her bridle-rein.

"Take your hand off of there!" she commanded.

"I offered you a fair bargain. I meant to stand by it. But now I will have you whether or no!"

For reply she thrust her hand among the folds of her dress and drew forth a revolver, which she aimed straight at his dilating eyes.

"Once more!" she said, hoarsely.

"Ha! would you kill me?" he ejaculated.

"Like the dog you are!"

He heard the ominous click. Death stared out of her glittering eyes, piercing to his soul like poisoned darts.

Nick Rathbun was no coward. He had backed down men who menaced his life. But he had never been so electrified as now by a human eye.

Involuntarily his hand relaxed, and with a rallying cry to her horse, and a jab of the spur, she forged ahead.

He was tempted to seize her in his arms as she brushed by him, but he would have hugged a revolver that would explode in his bosom.

He might have shot her or her horse as she rode before him, but he was not yet quite so mad as that.

Good, bad, or indifferent, be she what she might, he knew that he would be torn limb from limb for so dastardly a deed.

On she rode, passing Judge Spoopendyke, and finally Thad Burchard himself.

Neither of these sought to stop her, though they knew that she was bearing support to the enemy.

But the fugitive was now but a little in advance.

Mile by mile the advantage of his start had been eaten into. Conscious of the inferiority of his horse, he had resolved to make the most of him, and when all hope was past, to sell his life as dearly as possible.

As nothing could be gained by watching the approach of his enemies, he had ridden with his face to the front, easing his horse in every way that he could, and getting out of him every possible measure of speed.

Not till he heard the rapidly-nearing clatter of the little mare's hoofs did he turn in the saddle, and then it was with a revolver in hand.

What he feared was that his horse would be shot at as soon as his pursuer was within range.

With no little surprise he saw that the pursuer with whom he had prepared for the first death-struggle, was the girl who had aided his flight.

She was already more than half the way between him and the next nearest, and was rapidly closing up the gap which his jaded horse could no longer maintain.

But had she joined his enemies? The expression of her face prohibited the thought. Soon her voice was raised in corroboration.

"Keep on! Keep on!" she shouted. "Lash the life out of him! You will need him only till I can overtake you!"

She was still with him, then, in the face of them all. But how did she propose to aid him? His horse was spent. He had not another mile of serviceable speed in him.

Spot himself was nearly exhausted. On a fresh horse, whose action was smoother, and with the added stimulation of hope, he might hold out for some time longer. But already he began to feel an ominous return of dizziness from time to time, that, sit as carefully as he might, caused him to sway in his saddle.

The rapid approach of the little mare put the last infusion of spirit into the mustang's failing heart. Belle was careful to make the most of this instinct of rivalry, but not allowing the mare to get neck and neck with him while she talked.

"Listen!" she said, as she came up. "There is no hope for you if you fall into the hands of these men. They are led by the most venomous enemy you could possibly have."

In looking around at her, Spot had taken in also the first of his pursuers.

He now interposed:

"But that is not Captain Midnight, as I have all along supposed. It looks like the man of whom I rented this horse."

"It is he," she admitted.

"And who are those with him?"

"His friends."

"What! Are these men of Cony Flat?"

"Certainly."

"And is it possible they are pursuing me in the belief that I have attempted to steal his horse?"

"That is their case against you; but—"

"Why, then I have only to pull up, and explain that it is a mistake all round."

He was about to put his suggestion into effect, but she interposed desperately:

"Keep on! oh, keep on! It is too late to explain. Do you suppose that they would believe you?"

"But they must believe me! I am not a horse-thief!"

"You do not know them. You do not know the men they have had to deal with. Even if

you had not among them a more deadly enemy than all else, they would laugh in your face, and strangle you while you were trying to prove your innocence. Be guided by me. There is but one way."

"And rest under the odium of theft?"

"Will it be better to be hanged by Judge Lynch? Can you clear yourself after that? Listen to me and reason."

"But you—you can testify—"

"They will not listen to me. Do you know that—that—"

She quivered with an agony of hesitation. Could she tell him? And yet, was it not better that he should hear it from her lips than from another's?

"That I am looked upon as a decoy for Captain Midnight? Will it better your case to be regarded as his accomplice? There is one there who will testify to anything that will induce them to hang you out of hand. He has sworn to have your life."

"Who?"

"Nick Rathbun. You do not know him. You have done nothing to earn his hatred; but you have it just the same. If you are taken, he shall die first. I promise you that."

"But there is no help for it. This horse is done. He may fall under me at any moment."

"You are to take my mare. She will outstrip them all."

"And leave you to their vengeance!"

"There is no danger to me. They dare not touch me, even if they were likely to harm a woman. The worst of them would not do that."

"But there is no time for the exchange. A stop to dismount would be fatal. See! they are almost within range already. They would shoot me or the horse."

"So much the greater reason for no further delay. As you say, there is no time for a stop. But that is not necessary. I will throw myself from the saddle, and you can make the exchange while in motion."

"What! You run the risk of breaking your neck for me?"

She was quite close to him. Her eyes were fixed upon his distended ones. He could see the quiver of her lips, and hear, almost feel, the panting of her breath.

For answer, she smiled on him divinely. She longed to tell him that she would break more than her neck for his sake.

Taken in connection with her previous betrayal of herself while she thought him asleep, he could not fail to understand that look.

It thrilled him strangely. Was it possible that women in real life were nowadays ever inspired with such a love?

Never had she appealed to him as now. Tenderness, the thrill of momentary happy love, softened and etherealized her beauty.

And she was willing to sacrifice herself for him! We are none of us wholly invulnerable to such flattery.

"You are mad!" he exclaimed, with a drop in his voice which showed that she had pierced through his armor of indifference at last, and at least arrested his attention. "You shall do no such foolish thing."

"I may never see you again," she made answer; "but, sometime, you may think of this moment, and you will know!"

Her voice almost sunk to a whisper.

Her eyes were fixed upon his as no one's had ever been before. There was sublime devotion in them.

Every part of her being came under the dominion of the passion that swayed her. Her body seemed to swell into new lines of grace, as she leaned slightly toward him.

With that same smile on her face, she slipped her foot from the stirrup and threw her knee over the cantle of her saddle, preparatory to dropping to the ground.

"Good-by!" she said.

"Stop!" he cried. "You shall not do it!"

And he threw his arm about her waist to restrain her.

"You will let me," she insisted, blushing divinely at the touch of his arm. "It is the one thing I can do for you."

"I will not let you! Do you think for a moment that I would profit by such a sacrifice?"

"It is your life!" she urged.

"My life be it, then!"

His hold upon her drew the horses so close together that, after chafing his leg a moment between their bodies, they had fallen into equal step.

By his clasp to hold her in her place, her shoulder was pressed against his breast.

"Listen!" she said. "It is my one chance of happiness. I should die if they killed you! Ah! you will know—some day! some day!"

In the delirium of passion that thrilled through her voice, she let her head sink upon his shoulder. Her lips pressed his neck.

Then, with a mad feeling that nothing but death could purge this moment of the shame of unwomanly boldness, she tore herself from his clasp, and would have cast herself headlong to the ground, but that, thrilled by the exigency of the moment, he had yet the strength and agility to seize her anew.

"Let me go! let me go!" she panted, averting

her crimson face from his, and struggling frantically. "I have told you all! I am ready to die! I love you! You know it! Should I not blush to say it? But with my last breath I avow it! It is the one pure happiness that has come into my life! Release me! I will die!"

In the struggle to save her from her own madness, Spot dragged her half out of her saddle, over in front of him.

Was it love at last? Had she won him? As before, it seemed impossible that her own soul could be so enslaved, without something on his part that demanded this utter surrender.

It was this that made her ready to believe that he must love her who loved so well. How could he see into her soul unmoved?

Clasped close in his arms, of a sudden her strength seemed to desert her; and ceasing to resist, she writhed 'round to look into his face.

Did she find there what her soul so hungered and thirsted after?

Could a man have been a man, and held her thus, and gazed into her questioning eyes, and known all, with no responsive tenderness in his face?

Who of us all would have answered those eyes coldly—No!

Whether truly or falsely, the girl interpreted his look with a cry that seemed as if it must bind him to her forever, and threw her arms about his neck, hanging upon his breast, and gazing into his eyes as if, for her, heaven lay within the magic circle of his embrace.

"It is too late to escape them," she said, as serenely as if even this had no terrors for her now. "But, we can fight them, and, if the worst comes, die together! Shall we stop now?"

Then Spot realized that, impeded by contact, the horses had lost their speed, his enemies gaining till they were now within pistol-range.

There was but one thing she was waiting for. She very naturally expected him to kiss her before he let her go.

How could he be oblivious to this, seeing the adoring expectancy in her face?

But, another face came between her face and his vision; a face as lovely as hers even at this crowning moment of her life—a face enshrouded as the angels' are in yellow effulgence, where hers was framed in the raven tresses of the daughters of men.

It was not an easy thing to balk this one culminating desire—to tell her in this moment that she had blundered.

It is natural to wish to put off the giving of pain as long as may be—to evade the direct infliction of it, and let it fall when we are not by to see.

But, eyes of heavenly blue blotted out the black of hers, gazing at him with irresistible reproach; and lips, not so vividly red as hers were wont to be, yet as full, as round, and with a velvet softness that even hers could not out-rival, appealed to him with as pathetic suspense.

A monopolist of monopolists is Love! What to him are other hearts? Like old Shylock, he insists:

"Give me the letter of my bond!"

With a feeling that he was a brute, if not a villain, Spot turned his head to look over his shoulder, and seeing the nearness of his pursuers, said:

"As well now as at any time. But there will be no fighting."

And he drew up his horse and hers.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BOOTLESS PLEA.

BELLE BLACKWOOD knew the madness of this surrender.

"Ah! you do not understand!" she cried. "They have come to kill you! To fall into their hands is certain death! The charge of theft is only a cover."

She strove to draw her revolvers, but he restrained her.

"I will risk their rough justice," he answered. "Security lies in numbers."

And though he left her in the saddle, he himself leaped to the ground, and took his horse by the head.

It was plain that those who had followed him so persistently were suspicious of some treachery in this sudden assumption of a pacific attitude.

They recalled his remarkable exhibition of skill with the revolver.

There were traditions of equal proficiency on the part of Belle Blackwood.

Those in the van of the pursuit were considerably separated from their supporters.

After decoying them within easy range, a suddenly opened fire might kill them all. Then would follow an appropriation of their horses, and renewed flight, now secure by possession of the best stock.

Leaders, as a rule, though prodigal enough of the blood of their underlings, have a very wholesome regard for their own safety; and the first men of Cony Flat were quite willing to live to fight another day.

Thad Burchard was the first to draw in his horse.

"Look out, boys!" he cautioned. "We've got 'em dead to rights now, ef we don't give 'em

a chance to trick us. They ain't the kind as caves fur nothin'."

"We kin afford to wait till the rest come up," assented the judge.

Nick Rathbun was the most recklessly truculent. And with good reason. He had been treated to a scene for which he had little relish—his lady-love in the arms of his hated rival!

"Shoot him down!" he roared, pulling his revolver for instant use.

But Judge Spoopendyke caught his arm as he passed.

"Hold on, stranger!" he commanded. "Who's a-runnin' o' this hyar thing?"

With a sudden perception that he might defeat his own end, Nick restrained himself for the moment, but with the resolve to egg on the mob to the extent of his ability as soon as numbers induced passionate counsel.

It was soon evident that he was to have good material to work upon. The stragglers came up with yells of exultant hatred, and were not long in breaking through the judge's barrier of prudence.

"Is one man to stand off the bull o' Cony Flat?" demanded Josh Colston, vociferously. "At him, fellers! We'll put him through a course o' sprouts as 'll make his hair curl!"

Thus spurred, they dashed forward in a body, with weapons held in readiness.

"Gentlemen," cried Spot, as they surrounded him, "this is all a mistake!"

"You bet yer sweet life!" yelled Thad Burchard. "It was a mistake when you undertook to run off that thar hoss o' mine!"

"You do not understand me."

"But we'll make you understand us!"

"Will you allow me a word?"

"Drap them weapons! Up goes yer hands, or we'll fill ye full o' lead!"

"No! no!" cried Belle, with a burst of mad energy. "Fight! It is to the death!"

And she flashed a revolver in either hand into line.

But Spot, who knew that certain death awaited so unequal a battle, no matter how dearly they might succeed in selling themselves, was more afraid of her impulsiveness than of the final judgment of the men against whom he was conscious of no intentional wrong.

With a quickness of eye and hand which was the basis of his wonderful skill, he caught both her hands, and deflected her aim, so that if either of her weapons exploded it would speed a harmless bullet.

But the movement was fatal to his own defense.

Several of his enemies leaped to the ground, and Thad Burchard caught him in a fierce embrace that made it impossible for him to get at his own weapons, if he had desired.

"Can you not see that I have voluntarily surrendered?" he demanded. "I put myself under the protection of Judge Spoopendyke."

But the judge repudiated the pre-eminence thus awarded him.

"We air all feller-citizens," he said, with the air of a demagogue on the stump. "This hyar is Thad Burchard's funeral; an' we air his backers. Ef you've got anything to say, say it to him."

"We'll give him a show to pray, ef he's quick about it," said Thad, fiercely. "Look at that hoss, gents! He's stove him all to pieces!"

This much was certainly true. The mottled mustang could scarcely stand.

"Oh, what did I tell you?" cried Belle. "Talk of justice! They are a lot of murderers!"

"Hark to that, gents, will ye? The pot a-callin' of the kettle black!" shouted Josh Colston.

He made no direct reference to Captain Midnight, but every one understood the allusion.

To her despair, Belle saw the man she had so striven to save disarmed and bound, though no one offered to molest her.

"Wretches!" she cried. "I suppose it is useless to appeal to you. Is there no man here with common humanity? Are you all mad, or pledged to the service of a villain who is using you to effect his own private revenge? Will you listen to me?"

"Talk! talk! talk!" scoffed Thad Burchard. "We've got him dead to rights, miss. What more do we want? Pass that rope, Judson."

"Stop!" cried the girl, now nearly beside herself with despair. "The man who attempts to put a rope on him dies! You shall listen to me, or there will be blood spilled here!"

Both revolvers were out again. It was plain that she cared nothing for her own life.

"You are playing into the hands of a villain," she went on—"that cowardly hound there!"

And she indicated Nick Rathbun with blazing eyes.

"I tell you, the man you are outraging is as innocent of any offense—far more innocent than any of you."

"Didn't he steal my hoss? Hain't we ketched him after a run of a good ten mile?"

"He never dreamed of keeping your horse. But for my advice you would have met him on his way to Cony Flat, to return him."

"Oh, yes! When he see us, he was so glad of a chance to return the critter!"

"He did not recognize you. He thought you were Captain Midnight and his men, whom he was fleeing."

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! That's good, that is!"

"He was runnin' toward the Flat when he spotted him—oh, yes, he was!"

"He would have been, I tell you, but for me. I told him that the Flat was not a safe place for him. You know that most of you are under the direction of Captain Midnight; or else you are a set of cowards. Would you protect any one against him? Would you dare to lift a finger when he cracked the whip?"

This was an unpalatable truth, and hence to thrust it in their teeth was a marked indiscretion. It did not improve the temper of the men who were at a loss for a rejoinder.

They began to execrate Captain Midnight much more vociferously than they would have done had he been present to hear.

"He had no thought of keeping your horse," continued Belle. "He lost his way in the mountains, and when I found him, lay unconscious through a fall from his horse."

"A fall from his hoss! What did I tell you, boys?" shouted Six-shot Johnny.

"You see the wound in his temple," urged Belle, not understanding this allusion, though it was fatally plain to all the others.

"I reckon you'd 'a' found somethin' more'n stone-bruises on him, ef I'd 'a' knowned as he hadn't no backin', an' could 'a' got in my pistol-practice on him a leetle airlier."

Belle turned her eyes upon the speaker. Was this the assassin whom she had baffled?

There was no time to probe the matter then, but she laid up a dangerous memory against Jack Kerby.

Still she said nothing of the cowardly attack upon Spot, not wishing her suspicions to be known, and so put the murderer on his guard.

"Hain't we harked to about enough o' this?" cried Thad Burchard, impatiently. "His racket with Cap'n Midnight may be so, an' it may be all a lie. But that hain't got nothin' to do with his holdin' up the coach. We've got him on that count. An' it won't make no difference whether he hangs fur that or fur stealin'."

"Holding up the coach!" repeated Belle, in surprise at this new charge. "What coach? When?"

"Billy Boston's coach, last night. Thar you have it, miss, all in a nutshell."

"Last night? Impossible! He has been with me every moment of the time since yesterday noon."

"That may all be so, miss," answered Six-shot Johnny. "But he held up the coach all the same."

"He is lying to you—he, a confessed assassin!" cried Belle, in a blaze of rage. "After shooting at a man already half-dead with starvation and exhaustion, when I came upon the scene in time to interfere in his cowardly work, he skulked off in the bushes. Oh, if I had but pursued him without delay!"

No one perceived that she was talking at cross-purposes. She seemed to corroborate what Jack had said. There had then, by her own confession, when she could no longer deny it with hope of belief, been this attack on the coach, under her very eye.

"Ha! ha! ha!" roared Thad. "The imp will out when a woman gits mad. You heyear what she says, boys. She sees the thing herself."

Belle did not grasp the misunderstanding, though she saw that her words had somehow produced the wrong effect.

"Listen!" she cried, with increasing desperation. "I tell you, the attack on the coach was an impossibility. At the time that you say, this man lay asleep in my room, so prostrated that, even with his life at stake, he was scarcely able to rise and keep the saddle this morn'g. You see his condition now—"

"After his tumble!"

"Judge Spoopendyke, will you hear me? Captain Midnight, my brother, can testify to the truth of what I tell you!"

"Oh! Cap'u Midnight ain't a-huntin' him no more, all of a sudden! He's ready to swear black is white, now, to save the neck he was achin' to stretch a few minutes ago!"

The men drowned her voice with derisive yells.

While she tried to gain Judge Spoopendyke's ear, Spot was hustled away in the crowd, and the noose was thrown over his head in spite of her threat.

When she realized what had happened, they had thrown him astride of a horse, and were hurrying him away toward Cony Flat.

Her obstruction had only intensified the feeling against him. To her auditors she seemed to have entangled herself in a net of falsehood. The upshot of it all was only to identify him with Captain Midnight, and to add a new incentive—the desire to wreak on him their long-pent rage against the formidable outlaw.

Nick Rathbun was glad to see her attention diverted from him to Six-shot Johnny; and as the thing was working handsomely without his help, he had willingly retired into the background of discreet silence.

Not for the world would he have attracted her attention now, could he have got away un-

observed. But the frantic girl believed that he was at the bottom of the whole matter; and in her despair she resolved that the enemy of the man she loved should not triumph.

"You, at least," she cried, "shall never live to see the success of your plot!"

And once more drawing her revolver, she fired at him through the crowd in which he was seeking to loose himself.

Lucky for Nick Rathbun that at that critical moment he had his eyes upon her; and the sudden blazing of her eyes warned him of his danger.

He saved himself by throwing himself headlong from his horse.

A neighboring horse got shot, and began to plunge furiously, unseating his rider, and nearly stampeding the whole troupe.

"Take her! Ketch her hoss!" arose the yell.

Half a dozen leaped from their horses, and sought to capture her.

But the little mare reared, and striking out savagely with her fore feet, knocked senseless the first who sought to grasp her bridle-rein.

Then round she pivoted, and dashed away like the wind.

"Shoot the hoss! Down her! down her!"

But here Judge Spoopendyke interposed.

"Hold on, gents! Remember it's a woman!"

And this magic word restrained them.

Though a woman, she was more dangerous than most men; and to save themselves from her deadly revolver they would doubtless have gone to any lengths. She was now flying, so there was no further danger from her. They did not seek revenge as if she had been a man.

But, Spot the Sparkler? They would take it out of him! Away to Cony Flat, and the gallows!

CHAPTER XXV. JUDGE LYNCH.

It soon became apparent that among Spot the Sparkler's assailants there was a strong party apprehensive of interference from Captain Midnight; and there was a growing feeling that if Spot was dispatched on the way to Cony Flat, they would be sure of him, whereas delays were dangerous.

Already, before Belle Blackwood had ceased her appeal, they had the halter about his neck.

The men who had been foremost in this aggression were Thad Burchard and his particular friends, but no sooner were they free from the observation of Belle Blackwood, than Nick Rathbun gave a free rein to his malevolence, and became conspicuous among the fiercest.

Thad and his friends had contemplated only the ignominy of being ridden into the camp with the halter about his neck.

It was Nick Rathbun who suggested that the end of the rope be passed along from hand to hand till its length was exhausted, so that a dozen or more thus dragged the prisoner along.

Then he sought to fan their excitement to the highest possible pitch, with a view to inciting them to a sudden dash, which would pluck their victim from his saddle, and drag him on the ground at the heels of their galloping horses.

"Boys, be we waitin' fur Cap'n Midnight?" he asked. "The sooner we git into Cony Flat, the less chance of his ambushin' us on the road, an' gittin' the hoss-thief away from us."

This speech was greeted with yells of defiance. Nevertheless, the pace of the horses was accelerated.

Judge Spoopendyke was the first to remonstrate, and he was unhappy in the choice of his words.

"Hold on, boys! Be you tryin' to choke the prisoner? Remember, his hoss is nigh played out, an' he's a-rockin' in the saddle himself."

This was true. Spot could scarcely retain his balance. His head spun round. His sight was dim. He had no hope of surviving this peril.

"So much the worse fur him!" yelled Nick. "What's the use o' bangin' up Thad's hoss any more, anyway? We kin carry him in a way as won't tire the hoss, nor trouble him to rock in the saddle, nuther. Eh, fellers? Crack up, an' have him out o' that! He's rode that hoss long enough!"

A yell of approval showed that this diabolical suggestion chimed with the native ferocity of the mob.

"That's the chalk! Snatch him bald-headed! Whoop!"

In vain was Judge Spoopendyke's appeal. For once they had completely thrown off the yoke that he generally imposed upon them.

In despair of the effect of a successful revolt against his authority, he began to whip the mottled mustang, appealing to those who had not hold of the rope to interfere.

For a time the mustang was swept along in the rush.

But madder and madder grew the gallop. Stimulated by success, the triumphant faction spurred their horses to the accompaniment of their yells.

It was evident that the mustang could not hold out. Spot was pulled forward in his saddle, the strain on the rope constricting the noose so that his eyes began to protrude with strangulation. In a moment he would be

dragged over his horse's head, and then all would be over!

It was lucky for him that this was no part of Captain Midnight's plans, or no hand but the ineffectual ones of Judge Spoopendyke would have been lifted in his defense.

But more men in that crowd than the majority suspected were in the outlaw's employ, and acting under his instructions; and pursuant to his will, they had allowed this thing to go as far as possible without the actual destruction of the prisoner.

It was now high time, however, to interpose; and Six-shot Johnny showed that confidence had not been ill reposed in his discretion and address.

As the crisis approached he had taken care to place himself at the side of the prisoner; and at the last moment he seized the taut rope, and severed it within a foot of Spot's neck with a slash of his bowie.

He instantly thereafter caught the mustang's bridle-rein and checked his headlong speed, so that he rapidly fell behind those who had pressed to the van.

At first, the sudden removal of the strain on the rope spread the impression that the victim had been plucked from his seat, to fall over the head of his horse; and the yell of bloodthirsty exultation that went up, showed that the fiendish instincts of the savage had been little if in any degree civilized out of the breasts of that murderous mob.

But a backward glance, to enjoy the spectacle of a human being dragged by the neck, disclosed their mistake. And now their howl of protesting rage was even more devilish than before.

Instantly they drew rein, ready to visit swift and exemplary punishment on the man who had dared to thwart them.

They were not a little surprised to find the prisoner surrounded by a party of men who looked equally determined with themselves.

"What's this hyar?" yelled Thad Burchard.

"It's business," answered Six-shot Johnny, displaying now some of the boldness that he had bragged to Miss Fairfax about.

"Who's this hyar?" cried Nick Rathbun.

And hitting upon what he thought would excite the greatest odium, he recklessly made a charge, without troubling himself as to whether it was true or not:

"One o' Cap'n Midnight's crowd!"

"It's one o' Judge Spoopendyke's men at the present writin'," retorted Kerby, with unruffled coolness. "But who be you; an' how long is it sence you took to runnin' this hyar camp? It strikes me as you've got altogether too much to say."

This was a very clever appeal to Judge Spoopendyke's vanity. He responded at once.

"I reckon the ole stan'-bys o' Cony Flat kin run the business o' their own camp fur a while yet, without no coachin' from outsiders," he said with dignity.

"You bet!" shouted a man who, though an "ole stan'-by," was none the less now in the interests of Captain Midnight.

"I allow," continued the judge, "as Thad Burchard don't have to be told that every man has a fair shake at Cony Flat. Ef the stranger stole his hoss, as I don't reckon but what he did, up a tree he goes. But thar hain't no jury pronounced on the case yit; so how do we know—accordin' to law, ye understand—as he's guilty?"

"Hang yer law!" growled Thad, glowering blackly. "We've got him dead to rights. That's all any honest man wants."

"That's all right fur talk," conceded the judge; "but it ain't law. An' I 'low as the prisoner gits the benefit o' the doubt every time in Cony Flat."

"What's the word, gentlemen? I'm only a humble feller-citizen; an' every man's vote counts fur as much as ary other man's."

When the judge assumed this humble role, he carried his point every time.

The two parties were drawn up in very warlike array. One formed a resolute little knot about the prisoner. The other compassed them round about in the form of a semi-circle. Though revolvers were not yet drawn, yet both sides had their hands on the butts of their weapons, in readiness for any emergency.

Thad Burchard had a morose, vindictive disposition which did not take kindly to humble pie.

He had full half the force, if not more, in sympathy with him. But the other party, supporting the acknowledged head of the community, had the moral strength on their side.

"I reckon it's all the same ef we do the thing reg'lar," suggested one of Thad's men. "He'll hang, anyway."

And this break turned the tide.

"We're losin' time," said Thad, turning away sulkily. "Ef we're 'lowin' to git him strung up to-day, we'd better be movin'."

With this compromise, the way was resumed to Cony Flat, the camp being reached with everybody in an ugly mood.

Judge Spoopendyke had not yet forgiven Spot for the trick he believed he had tried to play him; and he was as ready as anyone else to stretch the neck of this plausible amateur at poker. The only consideration with him was,

that his authority be not prejudiced by the carrying into effect of anything so important as a hanging bee without his presidency.

The Flat reached he interposed no legal obstructions; and Judge Lynch's court was organized out of hand.

Nothing could be simpler, or more expeditious. He was nominated for the office of Judge Lynch, as a matter of form on which he always insisted, and elected by acclaim. He appointed a jury of twelve, with Thad Burchard as chairman, the crowd confirming his choice, also as a matter of form.

No one objected that Thad was rather too much interested to be an impartial juror. Nor was it marked as an irregularity that Thad should forthwith proceed to prosecute his own case.

"I reckon, gents," he said, "as we don't want much more evidence than what we've got. You all see the snoozer ride out o' the camp on my hoss; an' you all see us overhaul him on the same critter, after he'd run the wind out of him an' the legs off of him, an' stove him up generally. As fur the road-agint business, the which that thar ain't no funeral o' mine, you've got the word o' Jack Kerby hyar. He kin give it to all over ag'in, ef you find it interestin'."

"I reckon I hain't got no more to say, gents," answered Six-shot Johnny. "But so's it can't be never brought up ag'in me, ef so be this gent's friends should ever show up an' demand an explanation, I'd take it kindly ef you'd let the lady testify as she see the horse as well as me. Billy Boston, you all know, said as it was Thad's beast. He's pulled out; so you can't git no more out o' him."

"Take the hoss around, an' let the lady see him. It won't do no good fur to ask her ef she recognizes this snoozer. He was disguised so's nobody'd know him."

With that consideration for a woman which lingers in the roughest Westerner's breast, the horse was led around to the further s'de of the house, where Viola Fairfax cou'd identify him from her window, without being shocked by a sight of what was going forward in front of the house.

The curious crowd followed at his heels, as eager for the sight of the girl's lovely face as to witness her identification.

She was not a little startled by the rout beneath her window.

At the same time a knock summoned her to her door, and she sprung up from her bed to admit her hostess.

The excitement of the day, involving the departure of most of the men of the camp before she was up, had made it necessary for her to forego her quest of the man she had come so far to find; and, indeed, the prostration following the excitement of the pulling up of the coach made her apathetic.

She was dozing when the hubbub startled her into quivering wakefulness.

"Oh, Mrs. Caha!" she cried. "What is the matter?"

"The boys has ketched that thar hoss-thief an' road-agint what held you up last night," was the reply. "An' they've brung the hoss around fur you to hev your say as to whether it's the one you see the road-agint on."

"Oh, am I to testify against this wretched man?" asked Viola, her heart misgiving her as she thought of the probable vengeance in that wild community.

"It's only a matter of form, miss. An' you don't hev to say nothin' ag'in the man, ye understand. The boys will take keer o' him. It's only the hoss as you've got to do with."

Mrs. Caha went to the window and raised it.

Shrinking with dread, Viola crept after her.

Her appearance was greeted with an expression of admiration that was a cross between a cheer and a yell.

Hats were tossed into the air, or shaken at her in the hope of attracting her eye to some particularly demonstrative admirer.

Then all stood uncovered, in token of respect.

"Dry up! dry up!" yelled Josh Colston, who had arrogated to himself, without appointment, something like the office of an informal tip-stave.

The jury stood around the horse, with their foreman at its head.

Judge Spoopendyke had been left before the house in charge of the prisoner.

"Miss," began Thad, in the most polished style he could command, "this hyar hoss what ye see is the property o' yer humble servant. He was rented three days ago by a ga—by a gent what was a stranger to me, an' to everybody in these hyar parts. He was rented in good faith, money down, to be returned in two days, sound an' in good condition."

"He didn't show up tell we ketched him this mornin', out in the mountains."

"Now the question before the Court is, ef so you'll be pleased to answer, might this hyar be the hoss you see the road-agint on last night, when the coach was held up?"

There could be no reasonable doubt as to the identity of the animal; yet Viola shrunk from giving testimony which might condemn a fellow being to death.

"The horse was but partly uncovered," she answered, tremulously. "And I saw him but a moment."

"But he was a hoss jest like this'n?"

"Ye-es, very like."

"You'd 'low it was the same hoss ef you wasbettin'?"

"I should think it the same, if I were sure that there was not another like it in the neighborhood."

"Which you bet yer sweet life that ain't—not in this section, nor in no other what ever laid outdoors!"

"Didn't I tell ye as it was Thad Burchard's, from the word go?" demanded Six-shot Johnny.

"You did," Viola was forced to admit.

"I reckon that'll do, miss. Eh, boys?"

"That's all we want."

"Did you see the man what was on him?" asked Six-shot Johnny, as if to get the whole of his testimony confirmed.

"Yes."

"Would you know him ag'in ef you see him?"

"That would be impossible. He was so disguised that I doubt if any one would know him."

"That's enough fur me! Drive ahead with yer rat-killin'!"

The last, of course, was addressed to the intelligent jury.

"We're much obligeed to you, miss," Thad Burchard had the grace to say, with a profound bow.

The crowd cheered again; and while Viola sunk almost fainting into Mrs. Caha's arms, the mob surged back to the front of the house.

"Waal, jedge," said Burchard, when he was back under the hangman's tree where the Court held its sitting, "I reckon the jury's agreed as to the findin' in this hyar case."

"Gentlemen o' the Jury," began the judge, whose title was a purely complimentary one, and whose notion of the duties of his office was of the most hazy character, "you've heared the evidence in this hyar case. The prisoner at the bar is charged with hoss-stealin' an' road-agintin'. Ef you find that this hyar hoss is the same what our esteemed feller-citizen, Thad Burchard, Esq., rented his nibs three days ago, an' the same what we ketched him on this hyar mornin', you will turn the hoss over to the aforesaid Thad Burchard, Esq., to have an' to hold, backed by the judgment o' this hyar Court.

"It has been testified, gentlemen, by a witness what ain't within the reach o' the Court at the present writin', as the prisoner hadn't no notion o' cl'arin' out with the aforesaid hoss, but was on his way to return him to the proprietor o' the same, Thad Burchard, Esq., as aforesaid.

"That, gentlemen o' the jury, is what in law constitutes a doubt; an' I needn't tell ye, at this late stage of the game, as the prisoner gits the benefit of all doubts."

"The deuce he does!" shouted Thad Burchard, wrathfully. "Waal, all I've got to say is, a heap o' good may he git out o' all the doubts I give him the benefit of! I'll give him the benefit o' the rope! An', boys, that's what ye're all sworn to!"

The jury seconded the crowd with a yell which showed that Judge Spoopendyke would have to look to his laurels, if he didn't wish to see his eloquence eclipsed by that of the next best man in the camp.

"I'm free to say," responded the judge, diplomatically, yet maintaining his dignity by an air of quiet self-possession, "as it don't make much doubt in my mind. But I'm a-givin' of ye the law straight. It's fur you to weigh the evidence."

"So much fur the hoss-stealin'. Now fur the next charge in the indictment, which the same it is holdin' up a coach on a highway o' this great an' glorious Republic,

"You've heared the evidence ag'in' the prisoner on this hyar charge; an', as it's a hangin' matter, ef you find him guilty o' the same, I reckon you might as well throw in the hoss-stealin' along with it.

"Air you all agreed, gentlemen o' the jury? Do you find the prisoner guilty, or not guilty?"

"Guilty!" roared Thad Burchard, without troubling himself to consult his colleagues. "An' now, ef we've had enough o' this tomfoolery, I reckon it's about time to git down to business. Pass that thar rope, ef you please!"

No less did the crowd take the concurrence of the rest of the jury as a mere matter of form. The yell of indorsement they sent up showed that they considered themselves a po'nt, if informal, factor in the administration of justice.

"We'll heear what the prisoner has to say fur himself, why judgment should not be passed upon him," insisted the judge, with dogged resentment of this growing insubordination.

But, Spot was plainly in no condition to speak in his own defense. He stood on his feet, but might not have done so had not he been held upright by two brawny fellows with his back against the tree on which it was purposed to hang him.

His head sagged forward on his breast. He seemed stupid, and scarcely if at all conscious

of what was going on about him, though in it all he had so vital a concern.

Bully Bill watched him grimly, and flattered himself that this condition was traceable to the concussion of the brain produced by his bullet.

"I'd a heap druther they'd leave him fur me to finish off," he said to himself. "But I reckon hangin' 'll do fur the want o' better."

Nick Rathbun was even more malignant. Nothing would do him but that he should have a personal hand in the destruction of his rival.

He had possessed himself of the rope, and in anticipation of the verdict of the jury, about which no one had had any serious doubt from the beginning, had shinned up the tree, and secured the dangling noose in place.

"Mount him on the hoss he stole," he suggested. "Let him ride—"

The crowd caught at the idea. Nothing is so taking as what is called "poetic justice."

In a moment Spot was lifted and thrown astride of the beast whose peculiarities had made him the innocent instrument of his rider's fate.

Amid deafening yells of the mob, drunk with the indulgence of the old bloodthirsty instincts of their savage ancestors, scarcely more savage than they, Nick Rathbun dropped the fatal noose over the head of the subject of his implacable hatred, and with a quick jerk drew it taut.

It remained but to fasten the other end securely to the limb, then cause the horse to leap from under his rider by a sharp cut of the lash, and a writhing body would be dangling between heaven and earth in the last mortal struggle.

Nick did his work well, and then shouted to those below:

"Now go ahead with yer rat-killin'! Give him—"

His words were drowned by a piercing scream.

Everybody started as that long-drawn shriek thrilled through him, seeming to search the course of every quivering nerve in his body.

Thad Burchard had raised a long, black-snake whip, with the intention of throwing all of his villainous malignity into the blow, so that the sudden leap of the horse might produce something of the effect of a drop through a scaffold.

At that sound he turned deathly pale, and his arm sunk nerveless to his side.

Spot, who was so nearly unconscious that he had to be balanced in his seat, started as if stung into renewed life, and then turned his head, looking about in bewilderment.

The whole crowd, stilled to sudden, breathless silence, followed the direction of his glance.

What they saw was a girl leaning so far out of a window of the Crystal Palace that she would have thrown herself into the street, but for the clinging hands of the hostess.

Her arms were outstretched in agonized supplication, and she shrieked wildly:

"Theo! Theo! Theo!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

A STRANGE BARGAIN.

DEFEATED in her efforts to appease the mob that had seized the man she loved better than life, Belle Blackwood was for a time a prey to such despair as eye has seldom seen and pen falters to describe.

In escaping when they tried to seize her also, she had gone in the direction opposite to that in which Cony Flat lay, so that their abandonment of the brief pursuit at the word of Judge Spoopendyke left her finally free of them.

For a time she was possessed by a mad desire to fly further and further away from the scene of the horror she was powerless to prevent. Let her place the length of the world between her shrinking heart and the shock that would blot out the life that was so intwined with hers.

This was a period of shuddering insanity; but it soon passed, to be succeeded by a dead lethargy of despondency.

She threw herself from the horse, to lie with her face to the ground, clutching the grass in her dumb anguish.

Nothing more could be done. Outcry was unavailing. She held her breath, wondering in a sort of furious indignation that death did not come to her.

"Why do I live?" went surging and seething through her throbbing brain. "Why is God dumb when all the earth is shuddering with horror?"

It was the cry that human pain has sent up into the silent heavens since the world began.

This paroxysm brought on a reaction when she lay in dull semi-unconsciousness.

She could suffer no more. Thought seemed dead. Consciousness was but a dim thread of blunted sensation.

She felt the ground on which she lay, the air fanning her cheeks. She heard the gurgle and swish of a mountain water-course, the sighing of the wind through the pines, the carol of a bird, hanging poised high in mid-air, the stamp of her mare to dislodge pestering flies.

The animal stood over her, waiting with

brute patience. Presently she ventured to nibble at the garments of the mistress she loved.

The girl did not move. She felt as if she were drifting! drifting! drifting! far away into fathomless oblivion.

How did it come about that things to which she had paid no particular heed at the time, gradually arranged themselves into significant relations, till all of a sudden she leaped upright as if a flash of lightning had revealed to her the truth in a single lurid picture?

"My brother!" she cried breathlessly. "Oh, impossible! impossible!"

But, once seen, the vision could never be obliterated from her mind.

"A plot! To destroy him! This is what Captain Midnight meant! The ambush was a pretense! He knew that I was listening! It was to throw me off my guard!—to make me a party to this! to this!—a blind instrument in his hands! It was infamy! Nothing but infamy would satisfy his hate!"

This was almost shrieked, in great gasps.

"No! it shall not be!" rung out her wild protest. "He and he alone can save him; and he shall! Oh, what precious time I have been wasting here!"

And leaping to her feet, she sprung into the saddle, and then plied whip and spur and voice, in the maddest ride that woman ever rode.

She was dimly conscious that it would not do to dash through the crowd bearing the victim to Judge Lynch's tender mercies, nor indeed to let them suspect that she was going for help.

Without any clear reasoning on the subject, she turned into a trail that she had passed in her blind flight from the horror that haunted her, and so made her way along a path only one mad like herself would have dreamed of attempting at such a pace.

Pitfalls yawned on every side. Here a stumble might have sent her crashing headlong against a ragged rock. There a misstep would have made inevitable the rolling of horse and rider down a declivity with death and mutilation at the bottom.

There was no time to pick and choose. Goaded incessantly, the brave little mare had to take everything as it came.

It was due to good fortune as much as to sureness of foot that she accomplished what cool, critical examination would have unhesitatingly pronounced impossible.

At last she stood, panting and reeking with sweat, in the midst of an astonished group of outlaws, with Captain Midnight at their head.

Her brother alone yet kept his bed.

As soon as he had satisfied himself that Belle had escaped with Spot, Captain Midnight had gone to bed, and slept in perfect serenity, knowing that the first glint of day would awake him, however much his rest might have been broken.

He was astir as early as the first of his men, and learning that the girl had not yet returned, went directly to her hut.

The door yielded to his touch. Mad Blackwood lay in the embrace of the narcotic. Special orders were given that he be not disturbed.

Shortly after daybreak a messenger, who did not understand the significance of the intelligence he brought, announced the appearance of a column of black smoke ascending into the sky from a mountain peak far to the northward.

Almost upon his heels came another, showing evidence of hard riding, who held a brief conference with his chief, the purport of which was unknown to any others. He had left Cony Flat shortly after the departure of the Vigilance Committee in quest of Spot.

A long hour of waiting passed, in which Captain Midnight seemed momentarily expectant, and in which he frequently visited the hut where Mad Blackwood lay sleeping, before word was brought of the appearance of another column of smoke.

Captain Midnight then ordered his men to get their horses in readiness for an instant response to his commands, but to keep them out of sight in the stable.

The men were to deport themselves as if with an idle day before them, but to keep where the word of command would not fail to reach them instantly.

Another hour, and a third appearance of the signal smoke, Mad Blackwood still lying undisturbed, and Belle not yet returned.

Then the captain ordered his men into the saddle, and as if by magic the spot assumed a warlike appearance.

They were on the point of setting out, when a horseman came dashing up at fairly breakneck speed.

At sight of him, and before a word had passed, the anxious, dissatisfied look that had darkened Captain Midnight's face, in spite of his great powers of dissimulation, relaxed; and with more excitement than he had betrayed in some critical situations in which his men had seen him, he now cried:

"Out of the saddle, boys! Into the stable with those horses! Out with your cards, dice, anything! We want a lounging camp here. Somebody start a slugging mill. Sing, dance,

do anything that will make you appear at ease."

He himself underwent an instant transformation. The old mystical smile came back to his lips. He was coolly paring his nails when Belle Blackwood dashed up with blanched face and quivering lips.

The boys started from their quickly assumed sports with well simulated astonishment and curiosity, keeping, however, at a respectful distance.

"My dear Miss Blackwood!" cried the captain, starting to his feet.

"Let us have no pretense!" she cried, not descending from the saddle. "He is your victim; but you must save him. I insist upon it!"

"If you will kindly explain," said the captain, coolly.

"No explanation is necessary. You know that by your machinations the gentleman who was here last night has fallen into the hands of a mob from Cony Flat, to be tried—Heaven save the mark!—on the absurd charge of stage-robbery."

"I know that, by some strange course of reasoning, you appear to have persuaded yourself that it was advisable to remove this gentleman from the ranch surreptitiously. If he has come to grief, I sincerely regret it; for, to say the truth, I rather fancied him."

"Will you persist in evasion? I tell you that I know you have brought this suspicion upon him, and that it was at the instance of my brother. But I appeal to you against my brother, and you must yield to me—oh, you must! You, and you alone, can save him!"

In a sudden paroxysm of despair she threw herself from the saddle, at Captain Midnight's feet.

"Oh!" she cried, "we have not been good friends. I have treated you harshly, because you pained me so. But this is too much! I cannot endure it! Undo your work here, and I will humiliate myself before you in any way, to any extent! It is more than my life you are crushing out! Save him, and I will kiss the ground you tread upon!"

It was the appeal of a wild nature that went blindly back to the old savage fetish worship and the deification of earthly rulers. She felt so utterly helpless. To win this boon she had nothing to offer but that adulation with which the gods are bribed to clemency.

Captain Midnight sought to lift her up, speaking as if shocked at a breach of conventional propriety.

"My dear Miss Blackwood, you forget that the men are looking at you!"

"Ah! can you trifle!" she cried, in a burst of desperate fierceness. "What are all the men in the world to me? The man I love beyond expression is dying a death of infamy through your and my brother's detestable plotting! I know that my brother personated this innocent man! I know that you kept me from discovering that the horse was gone! I know that you purposely excited my fears in one direction, and then allowed me to escape with him as I supposed, only to stumble into this pitfall of your devising! I know that you have conceded this to my brother's hatred, to bind him to you the more firmly! Yet I, who have sought in every way to thwart you, now come to you with only my tears and a pain that I cannot speak!"

"But if you believe that I have done all this, is it not strange that you should expect me to forego what I have been to such pains to secure?"

"Oh, I know I have no reason to believe that your heart of ice will be moved! It has afforded you only amusement to see me agonizing over the enslavement of my brother by your vile arts! But you have crushed me with a blow which is too—too intolerable!"

"I would kill you, if that would purchase his life; but since I can do no more, I will cling here to your knees and plead till you yield him to my prayers, or till it is past even your power to save him!"

"Oh, will you delay while the precious moments are flying? They are dragging him to a death of unmerited infamy! It is your work—your work! How can you be so wicked, so heartless? Give him to me! give him to me! I will never ask anything again! I will never oppose you in anything! Kill me, Captain Midnight, if that will satisfy your hatred; but do not let him die like this!"

Captain Midnight had never seen such a nature so wrought upon. He who had always been so cynically indifferent to human pleasures or pains, now gazed at this girl as if fascinated. He whose soul nothing seemed able to reach, now turned quite pale—a disturbance which his swarthy skin made all the more startling.

His breath came hard; his eyes scintillated strangely.

"Get up!" he said, so abruptly and with such a change of voice and manner that, as he stooped to lift her, the girl was startled into submission.

Then he held her at arm's length, and gazed searchingly into her eyes, now quite as oblivious of the curious inquisition of his men as she had been.

"Tell me," he commanded, "does this man love you?"

And she, staring at him with suspended breath, answered without evasion:

"No!"

"Impossible!" he ejaculated, shocked at the unwavering positiveness of her reply.

An infinite hopelessness came over her, so that her whole body drooped.

"I have told you the truth," she said, with piteous breaks in her voice. "He is as hard, almost—yes! yes! harder than even you!"

"And yet this utter self-abandonment for his sake?"

"I would give my life—oh, so gladly!—to save him from this!"

"But would you live, in—in—in—"

He looked at her with so strange an expression that he frightened her, even in that moment when it seemed that misery had no lower depth for her to be plunged into.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"In an unacknowledged marriage," he answered, slowly and distinctly.

Then, as he saw her shrink back, he added quickly:

"In the hope of some day making it at least tolerable, when time and the neglect of its object has blunted the edge of this inordinate passion."

But the words died on his lips.

Her face assumed an expression of such concentrated loathing and rage that even he turned pale again.

"He? He?" she cried. "You have done this thing for him?"

"I beg your pardon! I do not understand you. For whom?"

"For Nick Rathbun. I would—"

"You need not conclude. He has nothing to do with my actions."

"Then to whom do you allude?"

"To myself."

"You?"

"Is it strange that I too should have the ordinary feelings of a man?"

The woman stared at him in bewilderment. Then a sudden wave of crimson swept to her temples, while her eyes flashed with resentment.

"You are trifling with me!" she cried. "You are beguiling me till it is too late for anything to be done. It is worthy of you!"

And her scorn was right regal.

"Am I so unpromising a lover, then?" asked the captain, with a sardonic smile. "None the less, I assure you that I was never more serious in my life. Indeed, I think I was never before in downright earnest about anything. I wonder at myself now."

There was something in his changed manner that arrested the girl's attention. For the first time in her experience of him, his features worked spasmodically, as if not entirely under the control of his will. There was a new intensity in his eyes as they remained fixed on her face.

In the stress of her desperate exigency she had no time for nice analysis. She had swept along so that she did not stop to deliberate on her words.

"You have never cared for me," she faltered, the statement being almost a question.

"Not till a moment ago," he admitted, with an oddly blunt frankness. "I never saw the real woman till then. And, strange as it may seem, I have conceived for you the first real passion of my life. Will you be my wife, if I save this man's life, and protect you from the persecutions of that other, who seems so distasteful to you?"

Never was a proposition put more coolly, as far as words went. Who could have guessed that in the breast of this man of iron was stirring a turmoil almost equal to that of her own?

It may be that the undercurrent of intensity was betrayed in some subtle modulation of the voice. At any rate, the conviction of his deep earnestness, something that the most violent protestations of an ordinary man could not have conveyed, rushed over her.

She felt a sense of breathlessness, of being swept off her feet by a current that she could not resist. Her decision must be instant. A moment might make them too late for that rescue which became more precious to her with a sudden flush of hope that it might be accomplished. A moment might change the mood of this strange man.

She seemed to be swaying dizzily; and in that moment Captain Midnight put in a last word.

"Come!" he said. "If this sacrifice, when he learns of it, touches him, I will release you. At most, you come to me only when your own desire must be abandoned."

The suggestion made her think, what matter what became of her if Spot rejected her?

"You will change your mode of life! You will save my brother—"

"Yes! Swear—No! no! Say that you will be my wife, and I—"

"I will!"

"To horse!" shouted the captain, in tones that his men had never heard before.

He caught Belle up in his arms, ostensibly to seat her the more quickly in the saddle.

While his lips were close to her ear he whispered with a passionate intensity that thrilled her with a strange fear:

"If ever I make you unhappy, my darling—" But he did not conclude.

The moment she was in the saddle, he sprung away to his own horse, leaving that broken ejaculation ringing through her soul.

The girl was too much excited to think it strange that his men should appear fully accoutered almost as suddenly as if they had sprung out of the earth.

Away! away! away! they rushed down the path they had once before followed in pursuit of Nick Rathbun.

But now it was daylight. Now the girl seemed fairly beside herself, and Captain Midnight had for the time lost his wonted imperturbable coolness. They rode as if each moment was worth a hundred risks of a broken neck!

The men took this unaccustomed excitement as by contagion, and neither whip nor spur was spared, nor could any peril daunt.

Never before was there such a ride down such a pass.

But one there was who surpassed them all, though nobody saw him.

In the rush of that headlong departure everybody had forgotten Mad Blackwood. Scampering away with whisking tails and flying heels, nobody saw him, roused by the hubbub, come to the door of his hut and stare blankly after them.

It was Captain Midnight's unguarded shout to horse that had awakened him.

For a moment he stared after them in bewilderment. Then he sprung back into the house, threw on his clothes, rushed to the stables, flung himself on the bare back of the nearest horse, and seizing a second by the halter strap, coursed away after them like a distracted demon.

The feat that her mare had already accomplished delayed Belle somewhat. Captain Midnight rode beside her. This enabled his men to keep pretty well in a body.

But Mad Blackwood, yelling like an infuriated demon to frighten his horses into their wildest efforts, was overtaking them. When he had got the best of the horse he rode, he changed to the other and kept on.

When they dashed into Cony Flat, he was at the heels of the party.

Belle Blackwood had eyes for but one object—a man whose seat on horseback elevated him above the heads of the surging crowd.

She saw the noose dropped over his head, and then drawn taut. She knew that nothing further remained but the cut of the lash which was to bring on that fatal wrench after which all would be lost.

"Oh, we shall be too late!" she cried. "Do something! Shoot them down! Kill every man on the spot!"

She was beside herself.

CHAPTER XXVII.

RESCUE.

VIOLA FAIRFAX gave her testimony in identification of the mottled mustang as she would have done before a regularly constituted court of justice. It was what was required of her, and it never occurred to her to do aught but comply, without qualification or reserve.

But the ferocious yell of the mob at this confirmation of what they had already made up their minds to, startled her into a sense of terrible difference from the stately procedure of organized justice.

"Ah! what have I done?" she cried, sinking back into Mrs. Caha's arms, as it burst upon her that her words might have fixed the seal upon a human life.

"Thar! thar! dearie," consoled the older woman, "you hain't done nothin' what any of us might not have to do."

"But—I did not think! Oh, shut the window, please! Don't let us hear any more!"

She threw herself on the bed, burying her head in the pillow. She shut her eyes tightly; but imagination defeated her there.

Mrs. Caha, having closed the window, went to the distracted girl, and put her arms about her soothingly.

Viola sprung up, and flung herself into the older woman's arms, as a frightened child might hide in its mother's embrace.

"Oh, will they kill him?" she sobbed.

"Hush! hush! Thar's mighty tough cases in this section—worse'n you'd ever dream of—what nothin' won't do 'em but the rope. We wouldn't be safe in our bed, the which we ain't nothin' to brag of as it is, ef the boys didn't give 'em a lesson once in a while."

"But I—I have fixed his doom! I shall feel like a murderer all my life!"

The girl shuddered, and hid her face.

"Don't you worry. The boys had him dead to rights before you opened your purty mouth."

Fascinated by the horror, Viola could not repress the impulse to strain her ears to catch every sound, that she might torture herself by following the dreadful execution in imagination.

But the yell that followed the final passing of sentence, and the suggestion that the prisoner be hanged from the back of the horse he was supposed to have stolen, brought her to her feet, quivering in every nerve.

"Oh, let me go! I may be able to plead for him!" she cried. "They will at least give him a little time! Oh, it is terrible! terrible! terrible!"

And breaking from Mrs. Caha, she ran toward the front of the house.

Tearing open the first door at hand, she rushed into a room looking upon the scene of human brutishness.

The window already stood open. A glance showed her such a spectacle as she had never before beheld even in imagination.

The faces of the excited men were diabolical.

But the central figure fixed her eye, and for a moment the horror of that dropping noose froze her voice in her throat.

Of course she recognized the man; and yet, it seemed too impossible that it should indeed be he!

She brushed her hand across her eyes, and stared again.

Then, with a shriek that pierced the air like a javelin, she almost flung herself out of the window as if to fly to him, crying:

"Theo! Theo! Theo!"

Mrs. Caha was just in time to save her from pitching headlong out.

But the shock was too great. The girl swooned before she knew whether her appeal was of avail or not.

That one moment of delay was sufficient. Before the crowd had recovered, a shout arose which gave a new direction to their thoughts.

"Captain Midnight! Captain Midnight!"

All looked, to see bearing down upon them like the wind a troop not so numerous as themselves, but sufficiently large to make their organized action, especially under that feared leader, most formidable.

With his long beard blown flat against his breast, Captain Midnight rode in advance of his men, but with Belle Blackwood at his side.

The expression of this girl's face made her scarcely less terrible than he.

Those that we fear most are not those who have the power to overwhelm us, but those who have resolved to die, if need be, in the attempt. It is desperation that makes the heart quail.

Yet there were men of Cony Flat who, having bid defiance to Captain Midnight in the act of wreaking vengeance on one of his men, were now ready to stand out, and fight for their independence.

Full half of the lynchers drew their weapons to resist his interference.

But Captain Midnight had arranged for this. He knew that there is nothing so easy as to create a panic in an unorganized mob, and nothing that renders them so helpless.

His own creatures were in all parts of the crowd; and they, with cries of fear, and rushing about as if to escape, soon shook the courage of the stoutest-hearted.

Here and there was a man of dogged obstinacy, who would have fought even with the prospect of being deserted by all of his comrades. But such were jostled against, and in one or two cases deliberately knocked down—of course from behind, so that they did not see their assailants.

But most were open to that unreasoning panic which makes a crowd of men like a drove of stampeded cattle; and before the outlaw band plunged among them, they were scattering in every direction.

There were shots enough interchanged, but not an outlaw was dismounted.

One man at least in the crowd of lynchers saw through this plot, and because he saw through it prudently followed the example of the worst frightened.

Bully Bill decamped with the most active in flight.

But there was another goaded to rage and desperation at the prospect of losing the satisfaction of his malice.

Nick Rathbun saw the woman he loved in the van of the party coming to the rescue of his hated rival.

"Strike! strike!" he shouted to Thad Burchard.

But Thad, who had the courage of a bull-dog, and, being aroused, would have opposed Captain Midnight single-handed, was struggling in the grasp of Josh Colston and Judge Spoopen-dyke.

"Surrender!" shouted Captain Midnight, brandishing a weapon above his head.

Then came the hubub and flight of the stampedes, and the bellicose stand of the stoutest-hearted of those who were sincere in the effort to shake off the yoke of Captain Midnight's tyranny.

"Hold on!" yelled Josh Colston, as he threw his arms about Thad. "The boys has took water, an' thar ain't no use o' gittin' a swath mowed through us fur the fun of a crack or two at Cap'n Midnight. Remember, thar's women an' children in this crowd!"

Unfortunately this was true. Both the women and children of Cony Flat were used to such scenes, and the ubiquitous small boy was especially prominent, principally as a stumbling-block to his swearing elders.

"Leave go o' me!" roared Thad, struggling ferociously.

"Help hyar, jedge!" shouted Josh. "Is this blame fool to git us filled full o' lead because he don't know enough to cave when he's bu'sted?"

And the judge, suspecting nothing, lent a hand.

This was what Nick Rathbun saw from his perch in the hangman's tree.

Maddened by jealousy, the prospect of defeat so infuriated him that, though he had every reason to expect that he himself would be riddled with bullets the moment after, he none the less resolved to destroy his rival.

To kill him would have satisfied most men, but Nick longed to cover him with the infamy of hanging. He could shoot him to death when he was once dangling.

"I'll give her something for her tears to wash out!" he growled, with a savage oath.

And, drawing his revolver, he set his first bullet to the work of the lash.

"Go!" he shouted, as the exploding weapon plowed a gash in the animal's hind-quarters.

The mustang gave a quiver and a bound.

The work would have been accomplished, but that Jack Kerby had stationed himself at the horse's head, with a view to preventing the leap at the last moment.

He, on the lookout had discovered the approach of Captain Midnight and his rescuers before any one else in the crowd, and so had delayed his action longer than he otherwise would have done, so as not to interfere with his chief.

Now, with a mighty effort, he forced the horse backward, so that he only bunched himself up as he felt the sting of the bullet.

"Curse the scoundrels! it is a plot!" cried Nick. "Are they all in the pay of this devil? Well, she shall have the carcass with an unbroken neck, then!"

And, more ferociously than ever, he next aimed at his rival's heart.

But, striving to glut his hatred to the full, he had let slip his opportunity.

An eye which nothing could escape—certainly not he who had dropped the noose over the head she loved—had marked him from the first.

A hand went up like a flash of light. There was an explosion, a puff of smoke, and a bullet winged on its unerring flight.

With a sharp cry of agony the would-be murderer rolled from the limb of the tree on which he lay, and pitched headlong to the ground.

The next instant there was the rush and sudden arresting of numberless feet; and Spot felt the arms of a loving woman thrown around him, and her sob of hysterical delight close to his ear.

Forced back by the iron hands that grasped his bit on either side, the frightened mustang sought to veer round, only to bump against a horse that came up on the side opposite to Belle Blackwood.

Then he set to backing, so that he would probably have given his rider at least a taste of what hanging was like, but that Captain Midnight reached up and cut the rope above Spot's head.

The halt was but momentary, and the cavalcade swept on, but with the rescued prisoner in their midst.

They were followed by shots that did no serious harm; but one of their number promised to work more mischief than all their enemies had done.

Leon Blackwood was a madman; not from any derangement of the brain, however, other than that which arises from the indulgence of inordinate passion.

Viola Fairfax had been dragged back into the window, unconscious. But he had seen her and recognized her, and realized the work she had accomplished.

The deliberate rescue of Spot by Captain Midnight proved that he was no longer to be counted upon.

Leon knew that at a meeting between the lovers the cloud of estrangement between them would disappear at a word of explanation.

"Shall he live to enjoy her love, while I fly from covert to covert, or cast my lot among scoundrels, a perpetual fugitive from the law?"

With a roar of concentrated rage, he forced his horse through the jostling ranks of the outlaws to get within reach of the object of his hatred.

"Away! away! Curse him, I'll kill him!"

To right and left he scattered the road-agents, fairly carving his way through them, jabbing their horses with his bowie to force them out of his path.

But his ungovernable ferocity defeated its own end.

Belle, who had eyes only for the man she loved and for his assailants, had not seen or heard Viola; so it was not for her that she looked back.

But, hearing her brother's voice, and knowing her cause to fear him, she turned her head in time to see him forge between the last two intervening riders, and advance upon Spot with uplifted bowie, already streaming blood half way to the hilt.

"Leon!" she shrieked.

Then, in an agony of appeal:

"Oh, Captain Midnight!"

But neither cry availed.

The murderer was implacable. Captain Midnight turned in time to see, but not in time to rescue.

As for Spot, the sight of the woman for whom his heart hungered had stimulated his flagging faculties so that the ordinary instinctive activities of the body resumed their course, while his brain rung and resounded with her cry of despairing love.

His thoughts were not cleared, so that he could not have recognized and guarded against an assault. But while the brain was thus half dazed, every nerve tingled with unimpaired vigor, and he kept his poise in the saddle without clearly knowing what he was doing, or what was going on about him.

With his life once more menaced, and he unable to even know his danger, the woman who had so often interposed her own in his defense, now acted with the quickness of love to save him.

Throwing her arms about him, she sought to drag him from his saddle, away from the assailant.

With a yell of fury Mad Blackwood struck.

His sister uttered a quavering cry of pain and terror, but did not cease her efforts to save the man she loved.

But now Captain Midnight was upon him.

A powerful strain on his bridle-rein drew his horse upon his haunches, so that the animal Mad Blackwood rode came abreast.

A swift grip of his wrist, an irresistible wrench, and the bowie was torn from his grasp.

Then a clutch at his throat, and he was pressed backward upon his horse's rump, with his captor bending over him, and glaring into his eyes with a look that he had never before beheld.

Why such intense ferocity on the part of one who had no particular reason to love the man he was defending?

Certainly not on account of Spot the Sparkler.

No! It was because the outlaw leader had seen that knife pierce the arm of the girl. Striking the bone, it glanced downward, leaving Spot with only a flesh wound—a gash in the shoulder, however, which would have killed him, had it gone an inch deeper!

After the first terrifying thrill, the arm was benumbed to the shoulder, so that she no longer had any consciousness of it as a part of her body, as it slipped from Spot's back, and hung helpless at her side.

But her brother's own hand could not kill her loyal affection for him.

"Captain Midnight, it is my brother!" she cried, in expostulation against his violence.

"Has he hurt you?" asked the captain, looking at her with the glare of vengeance yet in his eyes.

"It is nothing!" she protested, trying to hide the hand down which she felt that the blood must already be trickling, though she could not feel it.

"It went through your arm. I saw it."

"The point may have scratched me. It does not pain."

This was true; but her white face showed the shock she had sustained.

Captain Midnight finished the disarmament of the murderer, and turned him over to a couple of his men, commanding:

"See that we hear no more from him!"

Blackwood raged like a madman, and but that his sister's eye followed him, he might have reaped as a reward of the trouble he gave them, some roughness at the hands of his keepers.

Captain Midnight himself bound up Belle's arm, and hung it in a sling, the grave tenderness with which he touched her being a new revelation to the girl.

He rode in silence the rest of the way to the ranch, and after Spot had been returned to his former retreat, and Leon had been put under guard so that he could not again attempt his life, even if the gloom into which he was plunged should turn anew to violence, he redressed the wounded arm with the better appliances there afforded, and then said quietly:

"I wish to release you from your engagement to me."

The girl looked at him quickly, with a mounting flush.

"Do not misunderstand me," he said. "I wish to leave you free to follow your own inclinations. If they ever turn to me, be assured I shall claim them eagerly."

"You are very kind!" she replied, in a low voice.

"Then, as if anxious to escape the embarrassment of this matter, she asked him, abruptly:

"Did you know that Mr. Chalmers was in the hands of the mob before I announced the fact?"

He met her direct gaze a moment, and then answered without hesitancy or evasion:

"Yes."

"Were you going to his rescue even without my appeal?"

"Yes."

"I found you prepared, and on the point of setting out?"

"Yes."

She hesitated a moment, seeming to waver in the next question, finally putting it:

"Why did you care to save him?"

"He is the kind of a man I wished for as an associate. He has skill, and courage, and intelligence."

"You had met him before you found him here?"

"Yes."

She drew a slow, deep breath, and then concluded point-blank:

"And all this is the result of your wish to secure him?"

He answered her without the quivering of an eyelash:

"It is!"

She looked steadily into his eyes, that met hers unflinchingly, for a space, and then said:

"I thank you for your frankness."

He bowed low, and left her, her eyes following him as he walked away.

So, to gain this man as an ally, he had made an outlaw of him! The utter ruthlessness of this procedure would have shocked her at another time; but there was something in Captain Midnight's laying bare his own villainy that seemed to take it out of the vulgar order. He appeared to her an unscrupulous scoundrel, but not one of the mob.

She did not mince matters in her designation of his baseness. Perhaps the leniency of her feelings was due to the fact that he had carried to her heart a very deep conviction of the strength and sincerity of his love for her. With a woman even not particularly vain, that compliment covers a multitude of sins.

But it puzzled her that she did not resent Spot's wrongs more keenly.

She went in and looked at him, as he lay in a stupor that was somehow different from healthy sleep.

All night she kept her vigil, with fitful dozing that made her dreams and waking experience an inextricable medley.

Not a sound disturbed her but his occasional restless movement and inarticulate muttering.

But at daybreak sudden pandemonium broke loose in that secluded glade, filling it with terror and confusion.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ATTACK.

WHEN Viola Fairfax recovered consciousness, she appeared like a changed being. Where she had seemed weak and timid, she was now all fire and determination.

The moment recollection resumed its sway, she would have rushed out of the house and into the midst of that murderous crowd, to contend with her supplications for the life of her lover, but that Mrs. Caha clung to her while she explained that such a step was now no longer called for.

"But who are these people who have rescued him?" she cried, bewildered by the rather mixed account which her hostess gave of Spot's escape.

"It's Cap'n Midnight an' his gang—"

"Captain Midnight! The stage-robber!"

"I wouldn't put it so strong ef I was you, miss!" expostulated Mrs. Caha, with a show of uneasiness.

Like everybody in Cony Flat, she seemed to be impressed with the wisdom of the French maxim:

"It is well to speak politely of Satan, he has it in his power to do you so much harm!"

"But why could this man have taken him from a mob that was already in the act of hanging him? Oh, it must be for some terrible private revenge! How can my darling have offended him?"

"You will excuse me, miss," said Mrs. Caha, with some reluctance; "but the boys 'lows as your young gent is goin' in cahoots with the cap'n. Ef that's so, he's safe enough, ef he don't let himself git ketched alone ag'in."

"Oh, but this is monstrous!" cried Viola. "Mr. Chalmers is no outlaw; nor can he willingly consort with them, even to secure their protection. Captain Midnight, if it was he, has rescued him from one death only to inflict some cruelty of his own."

"I will go out and rouse the whole town to go to his recovery. I will satisfy them that they are mistaken, no matter what the appearances."

"You will excuse me, miss, ef I put in one word more, before you jump into a hole what it 'd be well to sound the bottom of first."

"Be quick, Mrs. Caha! Every moment is precious."

"It's jest this. An' I hope you will take it in confidence, an' not git me in a scrape."

"You may rely on my discretion."

"Waal, it might stand you in hand not to shout out what you're proposin' to do before the hull camp. Ye see, Cap'n Midnight has got a heap o' men in his pay in this community—nobody knows who or how many. The first man you meet goin' out o' the door may be one o' his'n."

"Spies!"

"That's the reason it takes the heart out o' boys when it comes to doin' anythin' ag'in' him. While you're shootin' at the cap'n an' the

crowd at his back, your pardner at *your* back may be stickin' a knife in ye."

"Oh, Mrs. Caha!"

"The cap'n wouldn't 'a' got your young man without a fight fur it, ef our boys had stood solid. I seen it all from the winder; an' I kin put my finger on some black sheep, ef I dast to speak."

"But what is to be done? Is nobody to be trusted?"

"Thar's the jedge. I reckon he ain't fur nobody but himself. But he's got a grudge ag'in' your young man. That's what soured *him*."

"A grudge against Theo?"

Mrs. Caha detailed Spot's first false step, with a graphicness which would have proved to one better versed than Viola that she was "no slouch" in such matters.

"But he let him get his money back!" contended the girl. "Doesn't that prove that he didn't mean to keep it?"

Mrs. Caha shook her head with a smile.

"I reckon the boys won't figger it out that way," she opined. "But I'll tell you what you kin do. You're a mighty good-lookin' girl, ef you'll allow me to say so; an' maybe you kin bring the jedge to your way o' feelin', ef not exactly to your way o' thinkin'. I'd try it, ef I was you."

Now, Miss Fairfax was not born yesterday, as the saying is; and it is perhaps possible for a young woman to have a fair consciousness of the ordinary effect of her beauty without being inordinately vain.

While blushing modestly, she saw the long-headedness of her hostess's advice, and said sweetly:

"Thank you!"

"Then thar's Thad Burchard what'll be safe. An' my Pat you kin tie to. Ef he stood in with Cap'n Midnight, I'd lamm the head off 'um!"

"Let me see Judge Spoopendyke. He will know whom to trust. And get him to come at once."

The judge came readily enough when he knew who it was that wanted him; and he was charmed with the interview that followed.

Viola "did her prettiest," and the way she talked him into a better opinion of Spot was beautiful to behold!

Only a cynic would have thought for a moment that the judge might have been somewhat more easy to persuade in that Viola promised him a formidable reinforcement from Blaisdell's, while an effectual routing of Captain Midnight would insure his own supremacy in Cony Flat.

Be that as it may, the judge followed his gallant rule of never standing out against a beautiful woman, be she right or wrong.

Beauty is the royalty to which kings do homage, and not only in the West is it the one rule by the "right divine."

The result of this interview was that a trustworthy messenger rode post-haste to Blaisdell's to claim the tender of service with which Jim and his friends had parted with the "Leetle woman from 'Frisco."

But he was not the only man who rode out of Cony Flat for outside help.

Nick Rathbun had been tumbled from his perch, and had narrowly escaped serious trampling under the feet of the horses of Captain Midnight's gang.

But he was worth a dozen dead men yet in the execution of his revenge.

Disgusted with the treachery with which Cony Flat was honeycombed, he trusted nobody; but, nursing his hurt, which was not serious, himself went for the detective, to lead him and his posse to the best point of attack on the road-agent's ranch.

So it happened that none of Captain Midnight's spies got an inkling of his project.

It was different in the other case.

Judge Spoopendyke acted with a great deal of subtlety, so that the appearance of a body of men from Blaisdell's was the first intimation that any but his trusted confederates had of his movements.

But then it became necessary to extend his confidence somewhat. Men who were believed yet not positively known to be "sound" were now approached, in order to make up a sufficient contingent from Cony Flat to make a respectable showing before their allies.

In these selections the judge made two or three mistakes; so that word was at once communicated to men who were free to convey it to Captain Midnight.

In this way the outlaw received a half-hour's warning of the meditated attack.

Captain Midnight's eyes blazed ominously when he was roused just before daybreak with this intelligence.

"It was bound to come to it sooner or later," he said, coolly. "We have been prepared for it all along. Now, boys, is the time to show your metal. One good blow now, and this country is ours at will for some time to come. They'll wait for more settlers before they tackle us again!"

The preparations all made, as he said, it was necessary only to set every man at his post, and they were ready for the attack.

This was done without waking Belle, who had fallen into a doze.

Just as the spreading gray on the eastern horizon made it impossible for a man to move about any longer without being exposed to observation, a pistol-shot announced that some one had been discovered, so that concealment was at an end.

Then the battle burst forth with a fury which showed how well the outlaws were prepared.

The attacking party had their horses in reserve under guard, while they crept up to the vicinity of the ranch on foot, with a view to a surprise.

Captain Midnight, with due prudence, had his horses in readiness in his stable, against possible defeat and enforced flight.

The men on both sides were used to guerrilla fighting; and after the first charge, headed by Judge Spoopendyke, with Jim Blaisdell as his second, the repulsed assailants took to the bushes for a regular siege.

The first note of battle caused Spot the Sparkler to bound out of bed like a trooper at the bugle-call.

One glance into his face was enough to show that he was delirious.

In a moment he flung himself into his clothes, and rushed from the room, to be confronted by Belle Blackwood, who had leaped up in bewilderment from her brother's bunk, upon which she had thrown herself in utter exhaustion for an hour's repose before daylight.

It was impossible to deter him. He armed himself with weapons belonging to Leon, and instantly set out to join in the battle, with no knowledge of what it was about, or to which party he belonged.

In despair Belle followed him, to use her influence to keep him with the party with which she was necessarily allied.

One thing she succeeded in persuading him to—to get a horse. And this proved very fortunate in the end.

To have rushed madly among the combatants might have brought death upon him before he was identified.

But the moment he entered the stable, he found himself a prisoner.

Captain Midnight was too good a general to leave his horses unguarded; and the men in charge at once suspected that Spot and Belle meditated taking advantage of this favorable moment to decamp anew.

They were very polite to Belle herself; but they were immovable; and she, being a woman, was not sorry to keep the man she loved out of harm's way.

Meanwhile the rattle of firearms was almost incessant, Belle's one anxiety being the knowledge that her brother was fighting beside his chief.

Her love prompted her to go out and share his danger; but she found that Captain Midnight had set a guard on the hut where she was domiciled, with instructions that, when she made her appearance, she was to be allowed to go nowhere but to the stable, and there detained.

Blood was already flowing on both sides; and the attacking party were beginning to realize that they had undertaken a formidable task, when both were startled by sounds of warfare in the rear of the outlaws.

Judge Spoopendyke had made his assault from one of the points known to him, and so had been forced to mass his men in a single body.

But there was another approach to the outlaws' den; and that he might receive warning if this was penetrated, Captain Midnight had here stationed two men—all he felt he could spare for such service.

The moment he got warning of this attack, he concluded that the men of Cony Flat had divided their forces, and assaulted him in front and in the rear.

Knowing that he had his hands full with those with whom he was immediately engaged, reinforced so unexpectedly by Jim Blaisdell's contingent, he realized that it would be futile to attempt to face both ways and struggle to maintain his position.

"No use, boys!" he cried. "We're surrounded! Retreat to the stable! There's nothing left us but a dash for liberty! With no quarter to hope for—remember that!—we'd ought to be enough for one of these crowds."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE OUTLAWS' RETREAT.

THEY fell back on the stable, closely followed up by Judge Spoopendyke, who wondered how a party of his men could have worked around in their rear without his knowledge.

However, in this independent warfare a few of them might have succeeded in doing that.

Then came a mounting in hot haste, a discovery that the new assailing party was on horseback, and a fierce charge through the ranks of Judge Spoopendyke's footmen.

What was the surprise of the latter, to discover that the confused body of horsemen that broke through their ranks, but not without some tokens of remembrance, were fighting furiously among themselves?

What could this mean? Had the outlaws fallen by the ears in domestic strife, and devoted themselves to mutual destruction?

But when, among those who were mostly in

the rear, and so were presumably pursuers, Nick Rathbun was recognized, his companions being all strangers, then it dawned upon the party from Cony Flat that they had co-assailants of the robbers who yet were not allies of their own.

Nick's hatred of Spot grew entirely out of the latter's relation to Belle. Otherwise he was entirely indifferent to him.

When, a willing captive to Viola, he need no longer be regarded as a rival, Nick was perfectly willing to make a common cause with Judge Spoopendyke against Captain Midnight, with a view to getting revenge on Leon, if not personal possession of his sister.

Prowling about the road-agents' den, he had discovered the rear entrance, by which he had introduced Detective King and his posse, reinforced by a body of men whom they had recruited, partly for money, and partly for the "fun" in prospect.

The rout was complete, these two bodies of assailants far outnumbering any force that Captain Midnight might reasonably expect to have brought against him; and when Judge Spoopendyke's men had taken to their horses, they were soon on amicable terms with the sheriff's party.

In all this turmoil, there was one man who was "going it alone." Bully Bill had not let his grudge go to sleep. Not invited to be one of the force from the Flat, he had discovered its formation, and had "gone in on his own hook," to snatch at any opportunity to wreak his revenge which their success might open to him.

When the outlaws took to their horses, there was no one to hold Spot any longer a captive. He must shift for himself in the general plunge for liberty.

Nothing suited him better. In his delirium he looked upon these as his natural allies, and cast his fortunes with them.

In the charge that followed, he was not the least formidable of those who spread a leaden hail about them as they swept through Judge Spoopendyke's ranks.

Between her two loves, Belle Blackwood was in sore perplexity.

On the one hand was her brother, whom years of devotion had made it an instinct not to desert. On the other, was the man who of all men most dominated her feelings.

Her course was finally decided by the consideration that, near Spot her chance of protecting him from any particular assault would be very slight, while there was one against whom he perhaps most needed protection.

She saw the glitter in her brother's eyes. Was he meditating the chance of taking advantage of this confusion to kill the man he hated so bitterly?

She resolved to keep near him, and prevent this attack at least, if possible.

She was right in reading Mad Blackwood's thoughts; but, he lost the opportunity of trying to put them into execution by the fierce activity of the delirious Spot.

In that wild retreat they got hopelessly separated, Belle with the greatest difficulty succeeding in keeping near her brother.

Himself compelled to lead the van, Captain Midnight charged two of his most reliable men with such watchfulness over Belle's safety as they could afford, stimulating their faithfulness by the promise of a reward for her escape unharmed.

He trusted most, however, to the fact of her being a woman, which would save her from personal assault, her greatest danger being from a chance bullet.

Once through the encompassing line of their enemies, the outlaws scattered in every direction, so that the battle became more and more a matter of individual pursuit.

With implacable hatred Bully Bill had ignored everybody else in the fight, seeking till he found the one object of his malice, and then sticking to him like a bulldog.

In his delirium Spot soon lost track of friends and foes. He only knew that he was pursuing a fugitive. That it chanced to be an outlaw, was simply due to the fact that these were the men who were seeking to escape.

The fellow was lucky enough to get in a shot that disabled his pursuer's horse; but he was unlucky enough to get a shot that disqualified him for any further villainy.

This was not Spot's work. Delirium had not destroyed his unerring marksmanship; but for some time back he had been snapping an empty revolver without knowing the difference!

The shot came from one who was in pursuit of him, and passing him, gave his final quietus to the fugitive in advance.

The fellow had been fleeing from what he supposed to be two pursuers. How could he know that the rearmost was chasing the man who was chasing him?

It proved that the Sparkler was under a similar delusion. Dismounting to examine the man he supposed he had shot, he turned to his pursuer with a smile, and then remarked:

"Waal, partner, I fetched him!"

Bully Bill stared in profound astonishment. Spot had put up his revolver, and apparently took his ruffianly pursuer for a friend.

Bill, too, dismounted, keeping his revolver in readiness, however, and watching Spot with the alertness of a panther.

But it was no trick. Spot's condition was soon unmistakable. His wild delirium lapsed into stupor. Losing all interest in the fallen outlaw he had dismounted to examine, indeed forgetful of him, he sat down on a fallen tree, rested his elbows on his knees, and dropped his head into his hands.

"Blow me tight ef be ain't gone daft!" ejaculated Bill. "Waal, that ain't no money out o' my pocket!"

And approaching Spot from behind, he disarmed him without attracting the slightest notice.

Then he seated himself on an outcropping boulder, at a few paces' distance, directly in front of his intended victim, rubbing the inside of his shins as he rocked forward and back—a pantomime expressive of intense self-gratulation.

"Waal," he muttered aloud, with a grin of devilish satisfaction, "I reckon I've got him now whar I kin finish him off at my ease. I wonder whar's the best place to plug him. The prettiest place is jest between the eyebrows."

Putting one hand on his knee as a rest for the other elbow, he leveled a revolver at Spot's forehead, squinting carefully along the barrel.

"That u'd fetch 'im like a stroke o' lightnin'. He'd never know what struck him. An' he'd make a harsome stiff, too. I hate butchery, I do!"

"Thar's his heart. I reckon I could line that; only his arm's in the way."

He tried it; shifted his position somewhat, and aimed again; but, finally, decided that the arm would obstruct a nice job, and went back to his former position.

A cat never played with a mouse with keener relish, save that the murderer found that it was impossible to attract his victim's attention. He even threw a stone at him, so that he might shoot him just as he started up. But, Spot seemed oblivious to it.

"Waal," he finally concluded, "I reckon I'd better finish him off while I've got the chance. It u'd be my luck to fool over the thing till somebody come along an' knocked my leetle game galley-west!"

And once more resting his elbow in his palm, he leveled his revolver at the spot directly beneath his victim's eyes.

Meanwhile Belle Blackwood had suffered from the previous overtaxing of the powers of her faithful little mare, who had been further disabled by a bullet in the heat of the melee.

Weakening with the loss of blood, she gradually fell behind, till those who were in pursuit of Mad Blackwood passed her in the race.

In defense of her brother, Belle opened fire on Detective King, and he gallantly returned the compliment by shooting her horse.

It was the best that he could do. He thus got rid of a dangerous enemy without deliberately shooting a woman.

The alternative was the risk of breaking her neck in the fall; but so much was unavoidable.

Left afoot without serious harm, Belle arose at a loss what to do.

Why she wandered in one direction rather than in another, she would have been at a loss to say. But, goaded by a feeling that she must do something, if only keep moving, she kept on till she was brought up by a spectacle that sent all the blood in her body back upon her heart.

It was the bloodthirsty *tete-a-tete* of the Sparkler and the Bully at the very moment when the murderer had decided to dispatch his victim before he was interfered with by some chance arrival.

With a shriek the girl sprung forward, drawing her revolver. Bill knew of her reputation as a markswoman; and though he could have killed the man he hated then and there, he was fain to look first to his own safety.

Belle got in her shot as the Bully sprung to his feet; but, though he gave a howl of pain and rage like a wild beast, he sent a return with such good effect that the girl fell at Spot's feet, uttering only a low moan as she pressed her hand to the spot where the ball had taken effect.

The pistol-shots roused Spot from his lethargy.

He started up, and saw the swooning girl and Bully Bill advancing upon him with his eyes staring, while he staggered forward to get near enough for certain work.

Like lightning Spot caught up the weapon that had fallen from Belle's nerveless hand, and sent a bullet through the exact spot in Bill's forehead that he had selected in Spot's own brain!

The ruffian fell without a groan, almost within reach of his intended victims.

Spot stooped to lift the girl to her feet; but with a sudden blotting out of all consciousness he sunk down beside her.

"Ah, he is dead! dead!" moaned the unhappy girl.

And dragging herself to him, she swooned on his body.

An hour later they were found by Detective King and his men, returning with Mad Blackwood, a prisoner.

Blackwood sat in moody dejection, from which even the condition of his sister scarcely roused him.

It was found that, aimed at her heart, Bully Bill's bullet had taken effect in the arm previously wounded by her brother's knife, and which hung across her breast in a sling.

Not dangerously wounded, she had swooned from the pain thus induced.

Nick Rathbun took charge of her, remarking:

"I reckon, King, it would be just as well to leave her to the belief that that fellow is dead. I know something about the case. He can be cared for at Cony Flat, while we set out immediately for 'Frisco."

This suggestion was acted upon, and Tenstrike, their first stopping place, was thrown into a fever of excited curiosity over the prisoner, silent and staring into vacancy like a maniac, on his way to the gallows, attended faithfully by a sad-eyed girl, as speechless as he, yet infinitely tender of his slightest need.

When the Sparkler awoke to consciousness, he found himself in a darkened room, lying in a bunk, rude enough in structure, yet dressed with scrupulous care.

The rustling sound that was caused by a slight movement to enable him to look about, brought a swift, light step to his bedside.

With a low murmur of gladness, the sweetest face in the world bent over his, and a voice like music said:

"Oh, he knows me!"

"Ollie!"

The whisper that was the only result of his effort to pronounce her name surprised him.

"Dear Theo!" she murmured, bending lower so as to touch his lips with her own and then resting her warm cheek against his in ecstasy.

"Hush! You are not to speak!"

But he disobeyed her.

"What is the matter? Where are we? What are you doing here?"

"You have been very ill, dear. But you are better now. And everything is all right. Oh, my darling, we are going to be happy after all!"

"I have had a horrible dream," he said, with a perplexed look. "I thought—"

But she stopped his lips with a soft kiss, and then laid her hand on his forehead, so that, with his eyes fixed on her face, he gradually sunk into tranquil slumber again.

A moment later the girl was sobbing in Mrs. Blaisdell's arms, while that motherly soul shed tears of happy congratulation over her.

"Doc Peasely, he's a power on brain fever," she declared. "An' he kin knock the spots out o' tic-dulleroo,—I know that."

"It is your nursing, you dear creature!" protested Viola, hugging her with all her might.

"We owe you everything. How can we ever, ever repay you? I shall love you all my life, and every moment of happiness I have, remember that I owe it all to you!"

At this point, Jim relieved his wife of her modest embarrassment by thrusting his head in at the door.

"The gov'nor's all hunk, Miss Violy?"

She had him by both hands in a moment, assuring him that she was the happiest girl in the world.

"Waal, miss," he said, "I reckon you won't mind. The boys is a—waitin' to see the upshot. An' ef so be you'd let 'em see your beamin' face, I reckon it u'd do 'em more good all round than a bigfind o' pay-dirt. Would you, now?"

Of course she would! Blushing divinely, and with her eyes sparkling like stars, she went out to them, and told them the happy news.

"Don't shoot off yer bazoos, boys," suggested Jim. "But jest all swing yer hats around yer heads three times, an' stretch the gap in yer face once at the end!"

And in pantomime these men gave three rousing cheers and a "tigah."

At Cony Flat, Judge Spoopendyke was at last undisputed "cock-of-the-walk," with Bob Bryce as his Right Bower.

On the site of the outlaws, ranch a solitary man sat on the back of a powerful black horse, gazing at a ruin of ashes revealed by the moonlight. With a sigh he turned away, and rode slowly into the shadows. And this was the outcome of The Road-Knight's Plot.

THE END.

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